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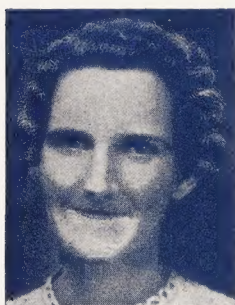
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TWO-GUN

Vol. 3, No. 2

April, 1942

WESTERN

NOVELS MAGAZINE



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WHEN A TEXAS TOWN GOES GUN-CRAZY

by George M. Conklin

8

Those who live by the trigger, men born with gun-magic, headed by the fastest lead-slinger of them all, the tamer of Abilene, Wild Bill Hickok!—This was the notorious company young Hallock craved to ride the raw red trails with, forgetting that this first killing would send him on the dodge, to regret instead of glory in each new notch he cut in his Colt!

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EMPTY SADDLES MEAN WAR!.....by Morse Chandler 71

Hole-in-the-wall for cattle rustler, road agent and killer, the Soldados would welcome Kid McCord only when he'd hardened his heart and his gunhand!

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THE KID FROM DAMNATION VALLEY.....by James P. Olsen 87

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BORROWED BULLETS.....by Ralph Berard 103

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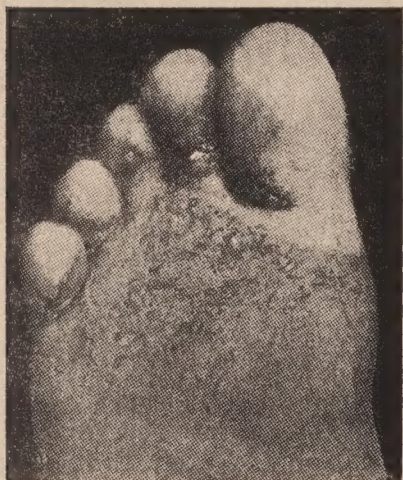
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When a Texas Town



Now or never, kill or be killed—they'd never get

CHAPTER I

THOSE WHO LIVE BY THE TRIGGER

"HAIR-TRIGGER" HALLOCK stood sidewise at the mahogany, one arm on the polished top, his back to the wall, in the Elkhorn Bar. He always stood—or sat—thus, facing doors, windows, people. Vivid in his memory was the scene in Jerry Lewis's saloon, Deadwood Gulch, when Wild Bill Hickok lay with his

cheek in his own gore; because, for once, Wild Bill had exposed his back to a door, the rear-entrance of Jerry's. Tom Hallock had been a gangling kid then, tending bar at rush time, sweeping and doing odd jobs most of the time, and the rest, which he had to himself, he spent in worshipping the tamer of Abilene and practicing with a six-shooter. He aspired to expert gunmanship, Wild Bill his pattern, though the fact was unknown to Hickok. Tom didn't realize what a career he was aiming at (with two sixes, when he had

SMASH BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL OF THOSE WHO LIVE BY THE

Goes Gun-Crazy

By GEORGE
M. CONKLIN



to the batwings past Hallock's guns!

Until the kid saw a man die from one of his bullets, Wild Bill Hickok would remain his pattern—until his first killing sent him forever on the dodge, young Tom Hallock would count Colt-speed king, and choose for his saddlemates only those hellions who lived by the gun!

mastered the handling of one), until he saw a man die from one of his bullets, a center shot, and a fair enough killing, according to frontier code; that is, he gave his opponent an even break. The dead man had been a half-baked desperado and his demise was no loss to the community; nor was that of his

two friends whose toes the trigger-expert youth turned up when they essayed an eye for an eye. But the triple killing had sent Tom on the dodge, regretting his notches rather than glorying in them. He had anticipated a feeling of elation, out-triggering men who lived by the gun, and was disappointed.

TRIGGER, MEN BORN WITH GUN-MAGIC!

Conscience was a pestiferous thing. But gradually it hardened and the number of his victims mounted and his guns became as much a part of him as his hands; now, at thirty, he found himself haunted with faces of the past, some blurred by time, but none of them missing from his mental gallery. Of necessity he lived where the law could not reach, or was farcically represented. Derringer, Montana, was a hotbed of desperadoism; it had tamed down not a peg since it appeared on the time-tables of the Northern Pacific. Yet even in the midst of men as law-shy as himself, Hallock must be eternally vigilant, for like a champion of whatever, there were plenty who would kill him for the notoriety it would bring them; there was an "if" as always—if they could get the edge. And remembering the lesson taught by the passing of Bill Hickok, he was ever alert in the presence of his fellow men, with one exception.

The exception entered the Elkhorn at that moment, looking for Hallock, Hallock who had not been "Tom" for ten years, but Hair-trigger, a two-handed gunfighter who had put the "art" in artillery and daily cursed the fame that would not let him act the normal man.

"Stranger just got off'n the west-bound an' headin' this way. Looks like he might be a law-dog. No hardware showin'." Thus spoke the "exception," otherwise "Reckless" Brule, in the ear of Hallock.

The Northern Pacific station was catty-cornered across the street from the Elkhorn saloon and Brule had been occupying a chair on the stoop of the latter. Whenever a train stopped or the old Concord swung in from the back country, passengers who alighted were accorded careful scrutiny by the gun-toting tribe of Derringer. The latest town marshal had joined his predeces-

sors in "boot hill" but a week since—though not by the hand of Hallock—and the minds of Derringer's denizens were temporarily warped with unusual suspicion of unfamiliar faces. Any time the sheriff of Missoula county might take it into his head to "clean up," either come himself or send a deputy. Therefore, Reckless Brule was moved to warn his pal, who had a longer record of killings than any Derringer gunslinger, albeit "cleaner" killings.

STANDING together at the bar, the two presented a strange contrast. Hallock, taller by two inches than Brule, was wide-shouldered, lean-flanked, with frosty eyes, aquiline nose and thin lips featuring a smooth-shaven face the color of redwood. He was crowned by a grey Stetson, knocked into a "Denver poke," the loose ends of the raw hide chin-strap dangling over the knot of his bandanna; wore plain leather riding-cuffs, thong-laced shirt and fringed leather chaps; stood up in the inevitable cowboy boots. Crossed belts supported his ordnance, two holstered Colt's equalizers. Brule, nicknamed "Reckless" by the man he had thrown in with because reckless of the hazard linked to the association, was gorilla-like in form and so bow-legged he appeared to be hairpinning the barrel of a horse even when walking. Hair and beard were fiery red and of luxuriant growth. A battered, short-brimmed Stetson tilted over one ear; his forearms were bare, his greasy vest flapped open; his trousers, worn outside his boots, were rolled up several inches above the ankle. A grotesque figure, this Brule, but a cross-arm draw artist and steel-true to the man he called "pal."

At Brule's whispered information, Hallock nodded and his lips tightened. The gorilla-man oozed away from his side and took spraddled stand near the

door, covering his purpose of watching by digging up a blackened briar and filling it. Other "bad" men were in the room, lesser lights in the triggerfinger "four hundred," but only one paid particular heed to Brule's trip to the bar. This hombre leaned on the mahogany ten paces from Hallock. He was a cow-puncher "gone bad" and no halfway about it; the disease known as "trigger-fingeritis" had struck into his vitals, and from drifting about tough camps and avoiding the open, his once tanned visage had begotten a pallor which was the derivative of the name "Chalk" Gallatin. Chalk fostered the hope of being pointed out as the gunpacker who had cut a notch for Hair-trigger Hallock.

Hair-trigger apparently did not notice when a quiet-looking stranger, sombreroed and booted, the one who had dropped off the Northern Pacific and made a bee-line for the Elkhorn, strode in and ranged himself suspiciously near the gunfighter. Hallock's eyes narrowed. The newcomer nominated his "pizen" and when the bartender turned to the back-bar, shot a glance to the left, in which direction stood Chalk Gallatin, presenting his profile. Clinking of bottle and glass as they slid across the bar drew the stranger's gaze to the front again; the "rotgut" he poured between bearded lips made him shiver. As he set down the glass he looked to the right, realizing Hallock was staring hard at him. Before the stranger could wink Hair-trigger had conjured a blue-barreled gun against his ribs.

"Yuh lookin' for anybody, mister?" bluntly inquired Hallock.

"No," replied the other, visibly rattled and instantly raising hands shoulder-high. "But" he added after the briefest pause, fascinated eyes on the muzzling gun, "I'd part with fifty bucks to know where the shootin'-iron

come from."

"The trick's priceless," replied Hallock grimly. "If I sold it to yuh I might go to 'boot hill' sooner'n I aim to. Stranger, I'll hafta disbelieve you're not out gunnin' till I've pawed yuh over." Hallock took no man's word but Brule's and, still holding the drop, frisked the stranger's person, seeking a weapon—and a badge. In search of the latter he turned back the lapels of the man's coat, pulled open outing shirt and undershirt.

"Button up," Hair-trigger grunted finally, and holstering his six-shooter, stepped back. "Drink on me, pilgrim, to show there's no hard feelin's."

"I can see I'm off my range considerable," said the "pilgrim," hardly reassured by the company he was in. "I won't linger after I've drank to yuhr health—an' hired a hoss. I meant to ask where I could get one. Ridin' to look over the Two Bar ranch."

HALLOCK mentioned a livery-stable on Main Street. The stranger "looked at" the two-gun man over the rim of his glass; then wheeled to depart, throwing a second glance at Chalk Gallatin, whose face was still averted. Halfway across the saloon floor, the prospective ranch-buyer was halted by the vibrant voice of Hallock and turned nervously.

"A word of advice, pilgrim, take it or leave it," droned Hair-trigger. "Git heeled, if yuh figger to reach the Two Bar healthy. She's not a peaceful trail out thataway."

"Thanks just as much," returned the other, forcing a faint smile, "but I'm slow on the pull an' I reckon I won't invite attack if it's apparent I'm not packing iron; will show I've got nothin' worth defendin'. For instance, yuh wouldn't believed I wasn't on the shoot if yuh'd found a gun on me. Tell yuh, friend, those who live by the trigger—

but I wouldn't want yuh should get mad at me, so I won't say no more."

"A fool has got to go his pace an' find," declared Hallock; then under his breath as the stranger exited, "Talks like a preacher not a rancher."

But Hair-trigger was uncomfortably impressed. To date, the only law that he recognized was that which rests in a holster. He lounged over to Reckless Brule, who, with his head out the door, was watching to see that the stranger laid a course for the livery stable.

"What yuh think o' his sentiments, Reckless?" inquired Hallock, who valued the gorilla-man's opinion.

"Huh?" Brule drew in his head and turned on Hair-trigger, jerking up his flaming beard with a one-sided facial twist, betokening disgust. "Hell, too pure for this world! A bebbe will hold him up some day—an' buzzards pick his bones. 'Tain't tame enough for the Gol'ding Roole, this Montanny." He snorted, letting his beard fall.

Neither saw the sneer on the face of Chalk Gallatin, "bad" cowpuncher, who was hoping the man bound for the Two Bar had a defective memory for faces.

"I dunno, Reckless, if yuh're right or not—an it's the first time," said Hair-trigger, and retired to his corner at the end of the bar.

The redhead gazed after him, so muddled and amazed that he opened his jaws and his pipe dropped. "No savvy," he grunted and, recovering his pipe, went out and flopped in the chair on the stoop.

Chalk Gallatin swaggered very shortly from the Elkhorn and paused by Brule's chair to ask, sotto voce: "Hair-trigger talked kinda queer, didn't he? Losin' his nerve, yuh reckon? I've heard tell gun-fighters do some—"

"Looket here," Brule's eyes blazed up into the pale face of the ex-cowboy, "yuh be damn' shore he's lost it,

yuh dehorned spawn of a maverick afore yuh stand up to him! He knows yuh're stalkin' him, that yuh'd like the glory o' posin' as his killer, but don't make no fatal mistake. He's got a mood on, like he gits sometimes, but his triggerfinger's 'iled, yuh betche."

The twist of Chalk's lips was a failure as a smile. He lifted his head at the clipclop of hoofs, saw the stranger off the Northern Pacific riding down the street from the direction of the livery stable and promptly turned his back until the other had gone by. Brule glanced at Chalk from under his shaggy red brows. He made a mental note to tell Hallock of the incident.

"There goes a shorthorn what's due to impede a forty-five slug afore he's many weeks older," Brule made a bet with himself as Chalk left the stoop and rolled up street. Scarcely did he realize how far-sighted he was—and at the same time, short-sighted.

CHAPTER II

HE KILLS HIS PAL

RECKLESS BRULE thought he would go to bed. He sat on the edge of his bunk in the shack he occupied with Hallock, several doors above the Elkhorn Bar, and listened to a harangue on laziness from the tall gunman standing in front of him.

"Which yuh've done nothin' but hold down a chair on the Elkhorn stoop all day, Reckless," declared Hallock, hooking thumbs in his belts. "Cash is gettin' low an' we need ammunition for our stummicks if not our guns—"

"Wal," said Brule with a grin, "why don'tcha go out an' shoot somebody? There's that gunnin' job the Ox Bow foreman wanted yuh—"

"Yuh think ag'in," advised Hair-trig-

ger, his brow darkening slightly. "Yuh know that squatter on the Ox Bowland had a family, an' I ain't gunnin' no family men."

"Uh course yuh ain't. Kiddin', that's all. But, honest to hell, Trigger, I'd rather turn in than set in."

"The five fellers that rode in at sundown was the train robbers that held up the Great Northern two weeks back an' they got rolls an' want action for 'em."

"So yuh told me. Repeatin' yuhself, Trigger, but I ain't gonna fall. Yuh hop along an' clean 'em, with the help o' God an' a few brains." He had his vest off and his flannel shirt; began to pull at his boots.

"Get ondressed in the dark, then?" For revenge, Hallock blew out the lamp on the table. "Yuh'll be jealous when yuh see my pockets bulgin' tomorrer mornin' fireplace. An' yuh'll be hongry but I won't—yeh, mebbe I'll start yuh to breakfast. Reckless, yuhr too slow to grow fast!" Hair-trigger was chuckling, his nearest approach to a laugh, as he opened the shack door. A hearty "So-long, an' luck!" followed him from the darkness as he shut the door.

An hour from the time he bought chips in the "draw" session at the Elkhorn with the five train robbers, Hallock arose, cleaned to his last dollar. Another man took his place and the crestfallen gun-fighter swallowed two fingers of whisky at the bar, now presided over by the owner himself, Sam Brace, and walked out. As he emerged on the stoop, the dim, moving outline of a man, almost abreast of the hitch-rack, drove all thought of his "flat" state from his mind. Coming from the lamp glare of the Elkhorn into the comparative darkness of the starlit outdoors, Hallock did not recognize the figure. A word from either would have prevented tragedy, but neither spoke it, the man in the street forgetting that

Hallock's sight could trick him in the circumstances. Hallock saw the man's hand drop toward his waistline. One of the notoriety-seekers, possibly Chalk Gallatin, who had not been in the saloon that evening, flashed through the gun-fighter's brain and he acted simultaneous with the thought, throwing his right-hand gun with deadly accuracy. The figure sank soundlessly.

THE smoking tube in his hand, Hallock leaped off the stoop and warily approached the heap on the ground, hardly expecting it to move, for he knew about where the bullet had hit, but cautious none the less. Eyes by now more accustomed to the semi-dark, he stooped. A wild curse escaped his lips, cold sweat oozed from every pore—the still face, turned up to the stars, was that of his one and only friend, Reckless Brule, a hole drilled almost in the center of his forehead. Horror and revulsion gnawing at his heart for the first time in his life, and realizing that nothing could be done, that death was instantaneous, Hallock happened to glance at one out-flung arm of his dead pal and discovered, clutched in the fingers, a handkerchief!

"Was pullin' his bandanna—an' I reckoned he was mebbe Gallatin, aimin' to fan a gun on me!" exclaimed Hallock, stricken deeper. "Goddelmighty! He must've changed his mind about sleepin' an' was comin' to help me clean the train robbers! If he'd only spoke—or I hadn't been so damned quick! Old hand," lifting the head of Brule to his knee, "believe me, I didn't know it was yuh; I wish I was in yuhr boots this minit!"

He pressed the head to his chest and rocked on his heels in silent agony. Then he lifted to his feet, heaved the heavy, lifeless body across his shoulder and carried it up the stoop and into the well-lighted Elkhorn. Sam Brace and

several loungers, who had drifted toward the door as the shot boomed out, drew back as Hallock entered with his burden. The card players had given no attention to the shot because gunplay was such a common occurrence in Derringer. As a rule no citizen moved any faster when one or more guns tuned up in Main Street, unless he chanced to be in the line of fire. It was a gun-toting town. However, the entrance of Hair-trigger Hallock, muttering like a wild man, drew even the gaze of the poker-playing train robbers and the groups at two other card tables. Hallock eased the body of Reckless upon the bar-top, directly in the rays of a lamp, and, tossing his hat on the floor as if its weight oppressed him, faced the incredulous, staring groups of men. The card games were suspended; he was the focus of all eyes.

"That shot yuh heard killed Reckless—I killed my pal!" Hallock shouted, beside himself with grief.

"The slow-draw pilgrim which oozed in here to-day, shy artillery, was *right*—I'm the fool that had to go his pace an' find! If I wasn't always packin' guns an' bein' so free with 'em, trouble wouldn't be alla time campin' on my trail, makin' me watch sharp, day an' night—I wouldn't have shot so quick an' sayin' nothin', mistakin' Reckless in the dark for someun lookin' to cut a notch for me. Reachin' for his hanker," he held up the bandanna, "an' I thought it was a gun he was after. Chalk Gallatin, I figgered it might be—he's been honin' for my hair." He paused to draw breath, his eyes roving from face to face as if seeking relief, his hands clenching and opening, truly displaying more emotion than anyone would have imagined was in him. He had been looked upon always as a ruthless, silent, nerveless man-killing machine. "To hell with hardware an' gun-slingin'," he cried suddenly, "I'm done!" And

with frenzied haste, unbuckled his gun belts and piled them on the bar beside Brule's remains.

Instantly, to an accompanying hiss of intaken breaths as his several enemies present realized the lion had shorn himself of teeth and claws, hands darted to gun-grips. Hallock, self-disarmed and likely to pay the penalty for an unguarded moment, did not cringe; instead, contempt and anger boiled up in him, evident in the blaze of his eyes, the puffing of his lips. He shook a hard fist.

"Damn' yuh for yellow-spined skulkers!" he roared. "You wouldn't dast make that handplay if I was packin' iron!"

THEY hesitated, all but one with fingers resting on walnut butts; that one, "Blackfoot" Dixon, quarter-breed side-kick of Chalk Gallatin, had half drawn the Colt from his holster, but an invisible hand seemed to prevent him getting it clear of the leather. His gun arm was rigid.

"Yuh, Blackfoot! Yuh aimin' to cheat yuhr pal, Chalk, o' the glory o' salivatin' me? Why don'tcha draw, Injun?" Hallock's tone should have precipitated action on the quarter-breeds part, but it didn't. And he was not alone in his frozen state. Hallock dominated them, as much without his guns as with them. One man, displaying a proper fearlessness, may out-face several more easily than he can a single opponent.

Hallock continued, on a contemptuous note, as furtive glances were exchanged among the hesitant bidders for fame. "He was a man to tie to, was Reckless—of yuh all he was the only one would risk stickin' by me. An' to think I give him his ticket! It's a curse on me for the bloody record I've been settin' up, that's what it is! An' I hate to let Reckless go on in the dark alone; he'd never let me take any trail

lonesome—always to hand, joggin at my elbow, ready to back me in whatever. Go ahead—shoot, somebody! Yuh'll be savin' me a hull lot o' hell on earth. If I'm with Reckless I won't mind so much, for I can tell him I made a damn' fool mistake."

Hallock surveyed them one after another with a taunting expression, waiting for the shots he would welcome to come. But they did not. He was to be denied even the solace of forgetful death.

"Every tail curled," he pronounced acidly. "Not a thoroughbred among yuh with the guts to send me along o' Reckless!"

"Here's your chance to join Reckless! Yuh don't have to ask *me* twice!" Chalk Gallatin stepped from the outer darkness into the saloon with the utterance, his six-shooter lined from the hip. It threw a long tongue of flame with a cannon-like noise as Hallock turned toward the door. The gunfighter stared with filming eyes at the evil, leering face of Chalk, did not look at the smoking gun at all; no sound passed his set lips as his knees gave way; a moment he supported himself on outflung hands, battling with the lead in his system; then, with a sigh, stretched out on the floor.

"Well, he asked for it, didn't he?" Chalk snarled at the stony-faced men, annoyed at their silence when he had expected vociferous applause.

"Yeh, he asked for it," nodded Black-foot Dixon, and he was the only one who spoke.

"Others had paralyzed bazoos, Black-foot," observed Chalk, and with swagger more pronounced than ever, approached the bad. He laid a hand on Hallock's discarded forty-fives and belts. "Bein' I'm the only man had nerve enough to cash him," boasted Chalk, half-turning toward the men, "I reckon I win the right to wear his

flame-throwers—"

"Take your hands off those guns!" A girl's voice issued the command. Chalk Gallatin, more startled than if a man had spoken, jerked his head the other way. None had noticed the entrance, by the door to a back room, of Sam Brace's daughter, Sue. Almost twenty, she was the Amazon type, not much under six feet, splendidly proportioned. Her dark hair, which she could sit upon when unconfined, was parted in the middle and in thick plaits coiled around her head; features irregular and handsome, rather than beautiful. Looks and build were her mother's, a pioneer woman, for her father was stocky, but broad-shouldered. She had the courage of both, and was balancing Sam's "sawed-off" as expertly as any man in the bar-room.

Chalk wilted at sight of her, and not only because of the shot-gun trained on his heart. If he was capable of loving anyone besides himself, that other was Sue Brace.

"Sue," said Chalk, "yuh tells me to hands off an' I obeys. But nobody, only yuh—"

"*Anybody* with a grain of sand in his craw could back you down, Chalk Gallatin," interrupted the girl, scornfully. "You can shoot from behind and from cover and your talk is bigger than a dozen men, but it's just noise—that's the size of *you*! Think of you facing Hallock if he'd had a gun—"

That moment Hair-trigger stirred slightly and groaned.

CHALK'S hand flew to his pistol-holster. "Not dead!" he exclaimed, stepping back and looking down at the gunfighter.

Sue Brace breathed something which sounded very much like "Thank God!" then lifted the shotgun for a fuller bead on the hell-bent puncher. "Just you dare to draw!" she whipped forth.

"Take a chance with this shotgun if you dare!"

Chalk's lips curled back. He had flushed through his white skin at her scathing arraignment; now the pallor returned, intensified, not fear—though he knew she would execute her threat if he did not take heed—but white fury, born of jealousy; her defence of the helpless two-gun man would have been evidence enough to stake the fires of that poisonous emotion without Chalk hearing, in addition, what she said under her breath. The expression of his eyes was abysmal; it looked for a moment as if, in spite of the twin barrels, Chalk would draw and extinguish that remaining spark in Hallock. But the ex-cowboy's passion did not overmaster him to the point of recklessness; he loved his entirely worthless life first of all, and relinquished his gun-grip. Distrustful of him, even then, Sue Brace maintained her drop and called to her father, who had viewed her interference with a proud parental eye:

"Pa, you heard Hallock. Maybe Doc Bennison can do something for him. Take him up to my room while I keep this glory-hunter lined."

"No sooner said than done, sister!" Sam Brace moved quickly, suiting action to his words. Hallock was a dead weight and no slight one, but the sturdy saloonkeeper managed to shift him on his back, and with the daughter covering his retreat, staggered to the stairway at one end of the barroom. When Sam had passed up out of sight, Sue placed the sawed-off on the bar.

"To show you, Chalk Gallatin," she said, "that I'm not afraid for myself, only afraid you might finish the coward's job you started before I could daylight you."

"Yuh'd shoot me—to save Hallock?" Gallatin's rage-inflamed eyes burned into hers.

"In a minute!" she replied in a tone

that admitted of no possible doubt, her chin high. "If I'd had that gun handy when you stepped through the door you'd never have unhooked a shot at Hallock. Hallock's shouting brought me out of the back room and while I was listening you— Don't you feel low-down, Chalk Gallatin?"

"Yuh—yuh," sputtered Chalk, advancing on her a step, "like that Hallock?"

"Like? I *love* him!" Sue amended, unblushingly.

Chalk had nothing to say. The declaration had the effect of a gun-barrel smashing him between the eyes. He shot the girl one sinister look, then jingled to the bar and poured himself a drink. And drink after drink!

Sam Brace came down the stairs and over to Sue's side.

"Heart's beatin' faint—but *mighty* faint," he informed in a whisper that was loud enough for every ear in the silent barroom to catch.

"You get Doc Bennison, Pa," directed Sue, "and I'll go and stay with Hallock." She gathered up Hair-trigger's heavy belts with the dangling holsters.

"Supposin' doc's jiggered?" hesitated Sam; and added, "He bought a quart o' Scotch 's mornin'."

"You try him, pa. If you can't bring him, I will!" The Amazon started for the stairs, clashing Hallock's artillery to her breast.

Sam wheeled and vanished through the front door, chuckling. That daughter of his was a royal straight flush—you met one of her kind in a lifetime.

"All belly up!" commanded Chalk Gallatin, who had not lifted his gaze from the bar while Sue remained in the room.

ENSUED a concerted movement toward the mahogany; the bottle slid from hand to hand. No word was spo-

ken. Ten minutes went by and in came Sam Brace, followed by a big, unkempt, red-faced man in rusty clothes; "Doc" Bennison, whose medical and surgical skill was only equaled by his appetite for whisky. He would have been celebrated had he not sold John Barleycorn his rights to a name. Just now he was in an unusual state—sober.

"Upstairs, doc—first room to the right, Sue's," said Sam, going around behind the bar. "If yuh boys has killed off that quart by this time," addressing the bar flies, "I'll just collect the price from yuh, Chalk."

And Chalk thrust a bill at him without a murmur. Sam's shotgun lay handy. The saloonkeeper made change, saw Chalk pocket it; then watched, through lowered lids, while Gallatin fished a horn-handled clasp knife from another pocket, opened the blade and drawing his six-shooter, deliberately cut a deep nick in the walnut grip of the gun.

Bennison was upstairs more than an hour and all that time Chalk Gallatin hung against the bar, neither drinking nor talking. Just so much liquor silenced him, made him, to a degree, dangerous despite his yellow streak. The others, including Blackfoot Dixon, played cards half-heartedly at two tables. They were waiting, Chalk was waiting. Finally came the slovenly doctor, carrying his worn medicine-case. He got abreast of Chalk and the cowboy put forth an arresting hand, and broke his silence:

"Will he live, doc?"

Bennison's whisky-red face deepened in its ruddy hue. "I think so, certainly, Husky maverick. I got the bullet out, glanced off a rib. Smashed the rib, but it saved his life. Don't mean to tell me *you* did it?"

"It's better yuh let him die, doc," was the way Gallatin answered, his

sullen eyes full of menace. "I don't want to carve off the notch I just cut for him!"

"Open one of your veins and it would spurt yellow, Chalk Gallatin!" sneered the undaunted Bennison; and brushing off the detaining hand and nodding to Sam Brace, back of the bar, he slouched out.

CHAPTER III

ROMANCE SHOOTS CENTER

THE first words to issue from Hair-trigger Hallock's lips when he regained speech concerned the lamented Reckless Brule:

"My pal—what'd yuh do with him?"

Sue Brace, moving about the room and tidying up, unaware of his return to consciousness until he spoke, turned with a smile that was as cheering as morning sunlight.

"Well, if I'm not glad to hear that voice—and so strong! Lie still now, Trigger. Pa buried Reckless back of your shack. Don't feel badly about it—I mean, more than you can help. You've been in a bad way yourself. This is the second day since Chalk Gallatin shot you." She stressed the cowboy's name scornfully.

"Yeh, the yellow dog!" Hallock nodded slowly, too weak to be very emphatic. "Anybody else shootin', even Blackfoot Dixon, I wouldn't have minded so much; fact is, I honed to have 'em ventilate me just then—an' even now—pore Reckless!" He looked away from Sue who had seated herself at the foot of the bed.

"But you didn't mean to do it. It was a sorry accident, and guess as much Brule's fault as yours. I heard you tell about it that night." She did not allude to her part in the violent drama

nor, of course, to her confession before the Elkhorn's patrons.

"I'm goin' to live, am I, spite o' Chalk's bullet?" His question was fraught with no especial interest. He was blind to the warmth in Sue's fine eyes now as he had been blind all along, preoccupied with his notches and the first law of nature to the exclusion, almost, of all else.

"Doc Bennison says you'll be fine as split silk, just as good as ever. He removed the bullet. But don't talk any more now, Trigger. Sleep if you can; rest anyway."

"All right, though I wouldn't have a kick comin' if I cashed. Livin' without Reckless, my onliest friend, will be hell. An' thinkin'—"

"Think of this," Sue put in, "that he was *one* friend, but not the only one."

Hallock pondered the statement, gazing at her queerly. "This yuhr room?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes. And I'll be with you as long—as you need me."

"Gimme a drink o' water, please," he requested, confused, "an' I'll try an' corral some o' that sleep yuh recommended."

His wound healed, his strength came back, rapidly. Sam Brace dropped in on him two or three times a day and smoked a pipe while Hallock rolled his own.

"Say Sam," said the gunfighter, propped up on pillows, one afternoon, a week from the time he began to convalesce, "I'm runnin' up some bills with yuh an' the doc, an' I dunno how I'm goin' to pay 'em. I'm done with gun-singin', that's one shore thing, an' it's the only business I ever follered. How to make some honest coin is pesterin'—"

"Yuh let me an' doc worry about money, Trigger," Sam interrupted. "An' if yuh mention bills ag'in, I'll

knock your block off, bein's yuh're helpless. If I can't do my future son-in-law a turn when he's needin' it—"

"*Son-in-law?*" Hair-trigger almost yelled, sitting straight up.

"Here don't yuh get to buckin' an' open that there wound ag'in," remonstrated the Elkhorn's owner. "I says 'son-in-law' an' yuh goes into the air like yuh'd set on prickly pears. What's the matter? Don't yuh want Sue—or what is it?" He was a trifle huffed.

"Why shore I want—but, great guns, I never reckoned—" Then Hallock sank back and was briefly silent. "I know now why she looks at me so—so funny sometimes."

"Funny, huh? So that's the way it struck yuh." Sam chuckled, his anger fled. "Trigger, I know yuh're a dinger in a fight, but suspicion yuh're a pore lover—huh?"

"Uh-huh. But, Sam, I never tangled much with women."

"Tangled with one now, all right. Yuh been nursed by Sue more'n a week an' didn't wise up to the fact. Hard to believe, knowin' yuh've been conscious."

"Can't blame it all on my dumbness, Sam. How was I to know a girl as fine as yuhr Sue would take up with a low-flung killer like I am—or was?"

"Well, mebbe yuh are excusable on them grounds. But it's plumb fact. Yuh should've heard her tell that Gallatin, right before Blackfoot an' the rest the night yuh kil—was gunned. Yessir, to their faces an' straight from the shoulder!"

"What'd she say?"

SAM relighted his pipe before answering. "Yuh ask her, Trigger. It was shore plain enough an' set Chalk most crazy. He's been hangin' 'round her, yuh savvy, but couldn't p'int in anywheres. Seems yuh ain't knowin' nothin' about what happened that night

after Chalk plugged yuh. It'll be interestin' tellin'." And he related all the facts.

"I feel different tonight, Sue," remarked the gunfighter that evening, when his nurse brought supper on a large tray.

"Different? Worse?" She set the tray on a chair beside his bed and scanned him with anxious eyes.

"No'm; that is, nothin's worse but my heart. *That* is right bad."

She was instantly relieved by his quizzical expression; and at the same time his words quickened the beat of her pulse. It had been so like a game of blind-Harry trying to show this iron-and-granite man she cared, and to what extent she cared; but the bandage seemed to have slipped off. She came slowly closer, lips parted.

Hallock was sitting up; he reached down and captured her hand; drew her down beside him on the bed.

"Sue," he said, eye to eye with her, "forgive me for makin' it so hard for yuh, but what could yuh expect of a man whose mind was twisted with thinkin' murder allatime—professional gunfightin' is just that, even when yuh give yuhr marked man a show, like I always done. I wasn't driven into my first gunnin', like some—I did it deliberate, because I was crazy about guns an' honed to imitate Wild Bill Hickok, who used to hang in a saloon where I worked down at Deadwood. Had natural ability, I reckon, an' improved it with practice. My first killin' didn't make me feel like I thought it would, high-chinned—but I'd made a beginnin' an' had to go on. An' with the tough rep I've got now I couldn't figger that a girl like yuh—. But it's the truth," his grip on her hand tightened, "yuh're the first girl I ever looked at twice. Seein' yuh when I first hit this town, I said to myself, 'She's the woman I might've loved, but she ain't for me,

with my blood-stained hands.'

"You said that?" Sue's face dropped closer. "Listen, Trigger—"

"Tom's my name," he inserted, "though nobody's called me by it for a long time."

"Tom, I want to say that I hate bloodshed as much as the next woman and killing for hire is one of the meanest professions on the frontier—murder, just as you said. But a certain amount of killing, not for money has been necessary to tame this West, and I realize it and am not squeamish. Now that sounds strange, perhaps, coming from a woman, but my mother crossed the plains in a covered wagon, which was twice attacked by Indians; my father ran a saloon in Nevada mining camps before he came here and in his younger days was reckoned handy with a shooter. Your blood-stained hands, Tom, I don't approve of, but—I just don't see them!"

He marveled, speechless.

"If I'd half-guessed I'd spoken sooner, Sue," he said at last, leaning toward her, which brought their faces very close together. "But what had—what *have* I to offer yuh, except a name for quick-gunnin'—"

"Is that *all*, Tom?" she smiled with provocative eyes, provocative lips.

"No," he tensed, "not all! I love yuh, Sue!"

HIS kiss burned and lingered on her firm, full mouth; and she gave back with a passionateness that made him heady. She struggled for release to get her breath. His sinewy arms fell lax and he remarked:

"I'm no great shakes of a lover, Sue, but I reckon yuh know I mean it!"

"You don't realize your ferocity, Mister Man," she laughed. "I did once doubt, I thought you could be nothing but a cold-blooded killing-machine; you seemed to shun me, you never more

than passed the time of day with me. I thought you were too blind, too callous, ever to see that I loved you—or that you didn't care. And I couldn't throw myself straight at your head."

"Doubt gone?" he asked, still struck with the wonder of woman.

"Entirely. When I spoke the other day of Brule having been one friend, but not the only one, what held you back, Tom; didn't you understand?"

"Thought I did, but wasn't shore. Couldn't believe it, just couldn't. Hardly can now. Wonderful Sue! I wanted to die last week, hopin' to catch up with Reckless on the Long Trail an' tell him I didn't do it a-purpose. Now I want to live—what man wouldn't, knowin' yuh loved him?"

She beamed happily, then sobered. "I know you loved Reckless, man and man. It was a sad mistake," she sympathized.

"It cured me o' gunfightin'," he vowed. He turned half-around and pointed to the cartridge-belts and holstered guns hanging on the bedpost above him. "Yuh can take those irons an' junk 'em, Sue. I'll never put 'em on ag'in! Never!"

Her gaze followed his pointing finger and for several moments she was silent. The pause surprised him.

"Don'tcha want me to quit—?" he asked.

"Certainly," she interrupted hastily. "You must start all over, put your past behind and live it down. But listen, Tom: while you're in this town you are practically surrounded by enemies, not the least of them—though he is a coward—Chalk Gallatin. He's jealous of your reputation, he'd do any underhanded thing to be able to swagger and pose as the man who killed you. And not only that. He has made advances to me, honorable enough, but I've always repulsed him, detested him. He knows that I love you for I told him—"

Hallock did not mention that her father had informed him previously—"and it gives him two reasons for jealousy, two killing reasons. He's that kind, you know it as well as I do."

Hallock nodded and caressed his stubbly chin thoughtfully. "Yuh think as long as I stay in Derringer I got to pack my guns or he'll down me?"

"I *know* it. Leave as soon as you can—I don't mean run away—and I will go with you. Anytime, anywhere. Could Reckless Brule have said more?"

"He couldn't! It sounds like Reckless." The gunfighter caught up one strong, white hand and pressed it to his lips.

"And Tom," said Sue earnestly, "don't forget that Gallatin isn't your only enemy. He's the worst, perhaps, but Blackfoot Dixon is another, and Coldiron McClintock—oh, there must be a dozen."

"More than that, fellers that don't come into the Elkhorn, an' I ain't over-lookin' one of 'em," replied Hallock grimly. "An' yuh're plumb correct, Sue—I got to tote iron, much as I'm hatin' to, till we've shook the dust o' Derringer. I wouldn't let myself get laid low for *nothin' now!* Girl, can't hardly believe my luck droppin' my rope on yuh."

She tossed her head. "You can believe a fact, Mister Man." Her eyes fell on the tray. "There's your supper getting cold. Let me go now," drawing away her hand, "and feed up."

She placed the tray across his knees. In the act of lifting a cup of coffee, he paused, and set it down again, untasted.

"Sue," he said, "yuh won't mind if I ask yuh somethin'?"

"No, indeed, what is it?" She wondered, his manner was so different.

"Why, where at," he proceeded slowly, "did yuh learn to sling language the way yuh do. Yuh're eddicated.

Yuh don't talk none like other frontier girls, leastways the ones I've seen."

"Oh," she laughed, "mother had schooling and she taught me some. Then I went to a little log schoolhouse in Nevada. There's no great mystery about that—why?"

Hallock swung his head from side to side. "Me a gun-throwin' hellion, no good whatever to nobody, no looks, no money, never been inside a schoolhouse—an' the likes o' yuh takes to me. *That's* the mystery, girl. But," he added, quickly, "I ain't goin' to pry into it none!"

CHAPTER IV

WOMAN'S SKIRTS BETWEEN

TWO days later Hallock was out of bed and able to walk within the confines of Sue's room. When he tired of pacing up and down he would sit near the open window, well back from it so that he could not be seen by anyone in the street, yet could himself see from a certain angle. It was by advice of Sue Brace that he took this precaution; she argued the prudence of not letting his enemies know he was on his feet again until his strength had fully returned and his wound entirely healed. And Hallock readily acted upon this advice, seeing that it was good. The lips of Sam Brace and Sue and Doc Bennison, the only three who saw him, were sealed regarding his progress toward recovery.

That night, despite his caution during the day, Hallock was guilty of such negligence as nearly cost him his life after all. When dusk descended on Derringer, he pulled down the window-shade and lighted the gas. He had eaten, but was reluctant to go back to bed; his old vitality had reasserted it-

self and he was doing nothing to use up the excess of energy; therefore, he glared at the bed which had befriended him in time of need and fell to walking from wall to wall, incidentally passing so close to the window that his shadow was thrown upon the shade. This fact he absent-mindedly overlooked. He had drawn the shade for the purpose of cheating hostile eyes in Main Street, but could not have exposed himself more dangerously had he left it rolled up. His mind was traveling most pleasant paths, all revolving about Sue Brace, when a Colt banged in the street and, ripping through the shade, a forty-five slug burned across his forehead and smashed into the thin wall opposite the window!

Hallock sprang backward, startled, dashing the sudden outpouring of blood from his eyes. His wits collected in an instant, he leaped toward the gas-jet and snapped off the light. Then, springing by the window, spurred to haste by the thought that another bullet might be launched upon the heels of the first, he slid a gun from one of the scabbards on the bed-post. The familiar feel of the gun-grip caused his blood to surge with the old fighting lust; notwithstanding his renouncement of gunplay, he could not conquer in a moment an instinct he had catered to, fostered to perfection, for years. Sliding back to the window, he dropped to his knees and lifted one side of the shade carefully. His view was much restricted. Seeing none on the visible section of sidewalk opposite—the height at which the bullet had passed through the shade had told him at a glance from whence it came—Hallock crawled around to the other side and repeated the circumspect performance of peeping. But not the sign of a human being could he see to train his gun on.

"Scared," he muttered. "Figgered he'd missed when the light went out so

sudden. Near fooled myself to death that time. Forgot about my shadder."

He turned at the swift opening of the door to his darkened room. It was Sue, a light in the hall revealed. Making out his form crouched down by the window, she imagined, with a cold thrill of horror, that the shot from the street had accomplished its treacherous purpose.

"My God!" she exclaimed, for once in her life on the verge of fainting.

"Oh, I ain't hurt none, Sue," Hallock's voice revived her sinking senses. "That is," he amended, laughing as he got up and crossed to the unsteady figure, "I got my eyebrows singed an' was lucky at that. Why, yuh're tremblin', Sue." One arm was around her. "Tain't like yuh, girl, to bust up over a li'l thing like that."

"But—but," she stammered, pretty close to tears from the reaction, "I thought they had got you."

"Born to be a bridegroom yet," he reassured her, and kissed her cool cheek. She noticed a suspicious moisture on her face from contact with his.

"You said your eyebrows were singed? That one of your jokes, Tom? Let me see them. Come over here under the light, away from that window. How did they come to see you. You know I warned—"

"Yes, yes, but I slipped up." He told her how, while following her to the other side of the room.

WHEN, by gaslight, she saw his ensanguined visage, Sue was stricken again with apprehension. But when she had brought a basin of water and washed away the blood, found to her relief that a strip of courtplaster would answer as a bandage.

"Yuh got any idea, Sue, who the shootin' galoot was?" Hair-trigger asked, while she was applying the court-plaster. "I make a guess it was

Chalk, but wouldn't bet high on it, there bein' others like him."

"It wasn't Chalk. He was at the bar when the shot was fired," she replied. "I ran out of the back room when I heard it and there he was, just pouring himself a drink. So that lets him out. But Blackfoot Dixon wasn't there, nor Coldiron McClintock—take your choice."

"An' I could guess Len Roper an' a few more names, mebbe, before I hit it."

"Pa must have thought your window was the target, for he was over by the front door. He called as I came in, 'I don't see anyone. Better go upstairs.' I was already heading that way. Here's pa now."

"Pa," she half-turned as Sam Brace admitted himself, "this man of mine nearly scared the wits out of me, but he's all right, barring a scratch." Sam chuckled as he came forward. "Bet Trigger ain't never been so babied before in his life. How about it, Trigger?"

"I like it, doggone it!" Hallock swiftly defended his nurse and himself. "Sam, yuh'd enjoy gettin' hurt if yuh was younger an' somebody like Sue—"

"Shore, I'd enjoy it. Don't blame yuh a-tall." Sam looked at his punctured window-shade and the identity of the would-be slayer was discussed.

"Don't make no difference who," said Hallock, to end the discussion, "he plumb failed. But it shows how careful I gotta be, as Sue said. Shore is a pack o' wolves in this camp—an' I was as curly as any up to a few days ago."

But his enemies were not content with failure. It seemed to Hallock that his eyes had barely closed that night when voices penetrated his dreamless sleep. He sat up. The voices—Sue's and Chalk's—were in the narrow hallway, right outside his door. Sue was

saying, "I can get you through the heart first pull, Chalk, and I will if you move another step!" And Gallatin replied, "Believe yuh could an' would, dammit!"

Hair-trigger's battle spirit soared. He flung out of bed, pulled on shirt and trousers, and reached up in the dark for his guns. The belts and holsters were hanging in place, but the latter were empty. So, sans hardware or weapon of any sort, Hallock barefooted over to the door and swung it wide suddenly. The low-burning gas-jet threw light upon a most significant tableau. There were four figures, one opposing the other three, and all of them poised tensely. Sue stood nearest the door, presenting her back to Hallock. She gripped his missing six-guns in rock-steady hands, covering the precious trio halfway down the hall, Chalk Gallatin foremost, Blackfoot Dixon and Coldiron McClintock flanking him. Chalk's right hand grasped his belt near his holster and the fingers twitched nervously with repressed eagerness to complete the move to draw. As Hair-trigger stepped out of his room, Coldiron McClintock, a six-foot, angular villian and no second-rate artilleryman, huskily exclaimed:

"There he is!"

HALLOCK was in plain view of the men, but Sue had to depend on sense of hearing; the merest side-glance would give Chalk and pals their chance. This, in fact, was the critical moment, for Chalk, sharp-spurred by twofold jealous hatred of the man who loomed grimly just beyond, went so far as to unclasp fingers from his belt and fasten them on his Colt-butt. The wooden grip still boasted the notch he had carved for Hallock and, resolved that it should never be removed, knowing Hallock would out-trigger him in straight-up fight if allowed to fully re-

cover, Chalk had slipped upstairs with his two closest companions while Sam Brace was in the back room, his office. The telltale shadow on the shade had warned Gallatin, when informed of it by the author of the close shot, Blackfoot Dixon, that Hallock was getting dangerously well, would soon be his old self and now or never was the time to act. But, though the men had negotiated the stair-flight undetected, they had not reckoned on Sue Brace. She came out of the convalescent's room just as the three desperados reached the top of the stairs, and, needing no more than a sight of them to grasp their design, she flew back into the room and out again, lugging Hallock's guns.

"Chalk," said Sue, when Gallatin changed the position of his hand, "I'm watching and I can't miss your so-called heart at this range. Not talking to hear myself, either.

"Dixon!" on a sharper note, catching the quarter-breed inching behind Gallatin to conceal his purpose of staking the issue on a quick grab for his holster, "stand away from Chalk. You can't put over any Indian slickness on me."

"Sue," broke in Hallock at her back, "pass me the guns an' I'll fog 'em to a finish."

"Tom," she replied evenly, "you'll oblige me by going back in your room. I'm a corking good shot and they all know it. They're going to about-face and head downstairs again, clear this hall by the count of three, or they won't be able to go down at all."

And she stubbornly refused to give up the shooting-irons, though Hallock all but bent his knees to her. At the same time he thrilled over her grit and deft handling of the situation.

"One!" counted Sue, and Chalk visibly started. He perceived that she was going to be as good as her word.

"Hidin' behind a woman's skirts!"

taunted Chalk, glaring past Sue at Hallock, and taking malignant delight in the red rage that distorted the gun-fighter's features instantly.

"If yuh live long enough yuh'll swallow that lie, Gallatin!" rasped Hair-trigger, taking a step forward, one side of Sue.

"Sue, won't yuh *please*, as yuh love me, gimme them guns?"

But she shook her head and counted an ominous "Two!", and Chalk turned.

Dixon and McClintock had started sooner, desiring no more than Gallatin himself to brave the fire of Sue's borrowed artillery in the narrow hallway; and as "Three!" was uttered the desperadoes, spurs clinking, were descending the stairs.

CHAPTER V

HALLOCK LIFTS TRAIL

"I'LL thank yuh to send for Doc Bennison, Sue," remarked Hair-trigger, next morning, after breakfast.

"Something the matter?" she asked, though hardly believing there could be; he looked like the Hallock of the days before Reckless Brule's passing.

"No'm, feelin' fine. I want to ask him somethin'." He paused, and when he spoke again it was deliberately, as if he were carefully choosing his words. "Don't mind it, Sue, if I—well, I'd like to see him alone."

Although she shook her head and feigned indifference, she was a little hurt that he should want to keep anything from her. But she saw to it that Bennison was summoned.

"Doc," said Hallock, when the booze-fighting physician had lurched into one of the two chairs in the room, "how soon can I fight?"

Bennison arched his eyebrows, then smiled with one side of his face. "Unusual question, Hallock. You're coming around fine; best specimen I've ever treated. Soon! Why?"

"I can't let a girl go on protectin' me," rejoined Hair-trigger, enigmatically; Chalk's taunt rankled deep. He perceived the doctor was in the dark and explained. "That's twice she's stood Chalk off—can't let it happen ag'in."

The doctor nodded. "Know how you feel, Hallock, but it's childish for anybody to accuse *you* of skulking back of a woman; and," he added bluntly, "childish for you to let it rile you."

Hallock started to snort, then abruptly subsided. "Doc, yuh can say that to me an' get away with it. Reckon it's true, mebbe—but hereafter I'm aimin' to do my own fightin'!" An interval of silence, then, "She's a mighty fine girl!"

"She is," readily agreed the doctor.

"An' say, she loves me," proudly declared the gunfighter.

"Congrats!" Bennison extended a hand, still steady despite the number of years his system had been absorbing whiskey. "I'm only half-shot this morning, Hallock, so I know what I'm talking about and am sincere."

"Uh-huh. Well, yuh ain't answered my question, doc. How soon? I feel fit right now to lift a corner o' hell."

"Let me see that wound."

Hallock stripped off outing shirt and undershirt and Bennison made careful examination. "Sore?" he asked, pressing the healed spot.

"No!"

"Fight when you're ready, then. Take 'em one at a time. You're not in shape for a free-for-all yet."

"Keno! Chalk's my 'ticular meat. Others can wait awhile. Now, doc, yuhr bill—"

"Shut up!" said Bennison crisply,

"or I'll be the first man you'll have to lick. Fists, because I'm a rotten shot."

"Be damn' hard for *yuh* to coax a fight out o' me," laughed Hallock. "Tell Sam I'd like to see him when yuh go down, will yuh?"

When the saloonkeeper came up he found Hallock cleaning his guns.

"Chalk downstairs?" queried Hair-trigger abruptly.

"No," answered Sam, dropping on the edge of the bed and viewing Hallock's occupation curiously. "What the hell yuh up to, Trigger?"

"Aiming to settle my score with Chalk, Yuh heard about last night—the second time?"

"Sue said she'd caught Chalk, Blackfoot an' Coldiron on the second floor. They sneaked when I wasn't in the barroom."

"Yeh, an' she didn't make much o' her part in it, I reckon. Her way, an' yuh savvy. But she's stood 'tween me an' trouble for the last time, Sam. Give Chalk this message from me and when he drifts in: an hour from the time yuh see him, I'll meet him back o' the stage corrals an' shoot it out. Got that?"

"Ye-es," drawled Sam, "but I dunno about deliverin' it. Sue would give me hell!"

"If she knew—but don't yuh let her know. I'm in good shape, asked the doc. An', Sam, I wouldn't dare get myself shot up after all the care Sue's taken o' me. Only thing I'm afraid of is that Chalk won't grab a-holt the other end o' the snake. He ain't got a chance in a hundred an' he's wise. He may figger to win by a trick—he's a crafty coyote—but I'll have my wits workin' an' my eyes open."

UNCOMFORTABLY the saloonkeeper consented. "All right. I'll go along with yuh, as second, an' tote my sawed-off to keep Chalk's friends from interferin'."

Hallock reached over and clapped him on the back. "Hop to it! Lemme know soon's yuh've seen him—but careful Sue ain't around."

"Yuh bet I'll be, for my own sake," grimly responded Sam, and went out.

Two hours later he brought the surprising information that Chalk Gallatin had accepted the challenge, would, accompanied by Blackfoot Dixon to act second, meet Hallock and Brace in an hour behind the Sundown Stage Company's corrals. Hallock leaped up and began pacing the room in front of Sam, dominated by the old urge to kill. He even snapped his arm forward in the motion of throwing a gun. Then he stopped dead and the flicker of hell in his eyes faded.

"Blood-hongry as ever," he lamented, presenting a long face to Sam. "Death o' Reckless didn't cure me after all, an' I've sworn reg'lar every day—"

"But yuh can't kill off a thing like that so quick, Trigger. Hafta tame yuhr nature by degrees. No disgrace in fallin' down, but in givin' up." Thus Sam, sagely. "I've knowed gunfighters all my life an' lots of 'em reformed, though it was uphill climbin' an' they didn't do it in a day or a month. An' this here fight, thought yuh're the challengin' party, is more in the way o' bein' self-defense. Chalk's forcin' yuhr hand."

That hour of waiting was the longest for Hallock since he had been down with his wound. Ten minutes before the time set for the duel, Brace poked his head in Hallock's room.

"Shove along here, Trigger. Sue's gone to the store an' the coast is clear for a few minutes. Say, yuh're lookin' prime!"

Hallock was the old Hallock, from hat to spurred boots, and excepting his chaps; wore his low-slung guns with the old careless grace. His confinement had not lasted long enough to pale his

tan and he was hardly any thinner now than he was before his confinement, for he had been well fed.

Like a couple of mischievous boys, fearful of encountering Sue, the gunfighter and his second slipped out the back door of the saloon and walking along the outskirts of town came, in five minutes, to the stockade corrals in the rear of the stage-station. There was a clearing north of the corrals which had been used many times in the past as a duelling-ground by those who had not settled their differences summarily in main street or the saloons and dance halls.

"There's Happy Hoofs whistlin' to yuh," smiled Sam, as a pinto thrust its head over the pickets of the high corral and shrilly welcomed the approaching Hallock.

Happy Hoofs, the gunfighter's saddle mare and pet, boarded with the stage horses. The station-keeper, Cale Halpin, was a friend of Hallock's, therefore ignored the stage company's rules regarding horses other than those belonging to the line. Cale put in an appearance at the back door of the station while Hair-trigger was fondling the mare's handsome head.

"'Lo, Trigger, glad to see yuh lookin' so pert," Cale came down to the corrals with his hand out. "Had a siege, didn't yuh? Say, do you know that paint gal needs exercise a lot—an'—uh—Brule's cayuse, too. Are you goin' to ride the mare?"

"Not now. Exchanging lead with Chalk Gallatin here in a few minutes. Stick around and see the smoke," said Hallock, staring hard into space at the mention of Reckless's name.

"Chalk Gal—where'n hell did *he* get the nerve to fight *yuh*?" The station-man couldn't make it.

"Out of a bottle, I reckon—or mebbe he's stayin' sober an' dependin' on his tricky wits."

THEY lounged against the corral, waiting. When the hour was up, Chalk had not appeared. Still they waited. Hallock remarked that he could excuse Chalk for not being punctual at his own funeral. Not until fifteen, twenty minutes had passed did doubt arise in his mind, shared equally by Brace and Halpin.

"Reckon he's comin'?" said Sam, the first to voice the question in the minds of all.

"If he don't I'm goin' after him, even if Sue sees me," Hallock rejoined, his eyes deadly behind half-closed lids.

Neither hide nor hair of Chalk at the end of a half hour. So Hair-trigger and the saloonkeeper left Cale chewing a speculative cud and headed around into Main street. They had not proceeded far when Sam grasped Hallock's arm.

"Say, 'taint hoss sense to go canterin' round in full bloom this way, Trigger. He might be hidin' anywheres. An' it's just struck me what's his likeliest game: to lay for you in the Elkhorn. Savvy?"

"Yuh mean," said the gunfighter, "he'd figger on me gettin' tired waitin' at the corrals an' goin' back to the Elkhorn, an' when I drifted in the front door he'd bang me off?"

"Just that."

"Good head, Sam. And yuh're right. We'll checkmate 'im—go in the back way. Turn down here," heading in between two shacks; "he may have spies lookin' for us to show up on Main street an' warn him we're comin'."

They entered the Elkhorn by the rear door and Hallock pushed ahead into the barroom, expecting to catch Chalk off guard. But Chalk was not there, only a few minor characters in the turgid life of Derringer. These men manifested surprise at the sudden looming of Hair-trigger, panoplied for war and wearing his fighting face, and

so clearly was it genuine surprise, that the gunfighter surmised Chalk had not spread word of the challenge issued by the man he packed a notch for.

"Anybody seen Chalk?" Hallock asked standing behind the bar and sweeping his glance around; to receive negative replies from every quarter. The bartender on duty hadn't laid eyes on Chalk since the latter talked with his boss.

Hair-trigger turned away from the bar and confronted Sam Brace, who was leaning against the back-bar, cuddling his sawed-off. "Reckon he jumped the town?" the gunfighter asked.

"Dunno what to think—he's cheatin' somehow, yuh can put yuhr gilt on that."

Just then Al Deering, the store-keeper, scrambled over the Elkhorn stoop and staggered rather than walked into the barroom. He had a handkerchief tied around his head and it was splotted with telltale red.

"Gimme a drink!" he gasped, lurching up to the bar and clinging there. "Whisky — no chaser." He gulped down a drink tall enough to oil his organ of phonation and stiffen his wilting legs, then shot a forefinger at Sam Brace, who jumped as if a gun had been stuck in his paunch. "Yuh know where yuhr daughter is, Sam? No, yuh don't, I don't need to ask, or yuh wouldn't be standin' there so ca'm. Well, to make it short an' snappy, that lousy pup, Chalk Gallatin's run off with her! Yep," as Sam leaped a foot off the floor and Hallock called on his Maker to damn the soul of Chalk, "she was buyin' stuff in my place half hour or more ago. We was the only two in the store. While Sue was selectin' some canned goods off a shelf, I heard two hosses come up. Chalk was ridin' one an' leadin' t' other. He stopped only a minute to sling a look in the door from the saddle, then rode on around

the corner, down the alley 'tween my store an' Spokane Harry's dance hall. I didn't think much about it, not even when Chalk come walkin' in the front door a few minutes after. But it did make me take notice, yuh betche, when the son-of-a-gun shut the door an' dropped the bar. He had a gun out an' told me not to move, me nor Sue either. She gave him the scornful eye an' I betche she'd give him somethin' else if there'd been a weppin handy. I know her spunk. 'Yuh ready to go ridin', Sue?' Chalk says, hard, an' she asks him if he's crazy. 'Yeh, over yuh, he says, gettin' closer to us all the time. I was out from behind the counter an' wonderin' how I could turn the tables on the coyote when all of a sudden he jumps on me an' hammers me on the head with his Colt butt. 'Course my light goes plumb out an' what happened to Sue after it did is only guesswork, far's I'm concerned. When I come to I was tied up with clothesline from my own stock. An' stuff was scattered all over the floor, showin' what a fight Sue had put up ag'in him. Say, if he hadn't had a gun bet she could 'a' licked him bare-handed. Well, the door was still shut, but unbarred, for pretty soon a customer come in an' found me, an' I—"

HALLOCK and Brace were by this time going through the front door on fast feet. The hangers-on in the barroom, under urge of excitement rather than from any real desire to help, piled after the gunfighter and Sam, but halted in close ranks when Hallock wheeled on them and thundered:

"This is a two-man posse! Don't want none o' yuh scum taggin' along, not knowin' how many of yuh might've been wise to the dirty game an' kept yuhr lips buttoned."

And he would have perked his guns and killed them for rats only that he

anticipated need of all his cartridges and every second of time was precious. Both he and Brace were so stunned by the abduction that they exchanged but few words as they hurried along the street.

"I'll get my hoss an' meet yuh back the stage station," Sam said, suddenly directing his steps aside as they came abreast of the livery-stable.

Hallock nodded, wordless, and pushed on, half-running. He kept his eyes open, hoping to see one of Chalk's side-kicks; wondered if Dixon and McClintock had quit town with him. The thought of Sue helpless in such a crowd almost maddened him. He derived some relief from the reflection that Chalk, worthless as he was otherwise, doubtless had real affection for Sue and would protect her—unless her continual rebuffs and of him and his knowledge of her love for Hallock, had turned this regard to hate. That was possible.

The gunfighter dashed into the stage station, shouting at Cale Halpin; "I'm wantin' Happy Hoofs, damn' pronto!"

"Think I'm up in Canady?" snorted Cale, putting fingers in his ears. Then, as the full power of the blazing eyes shocked him into activity, "C'mon, Trigger, right this way to yuhr hoss an' saddle. I shore ain't danglin' nor askin' questions when yuh looks like that!"

He plunged out the back door with Hallock on his heels and ran to the stable where the horses were quartered in winter. From the harness-room he dragged forth Hair-trigger's riding-gear, while the gunfighter hastened over to the corral in which Happy Hoofs was impounded. Sound of her master's voice brought the eager pinto pounding up the instant Hallock unbarred the gate. He never had to use a rope on Happy Hoofs—and rarely spurs. While he was deftly saddling, Hair-trigger told the palpitating station-

keeper enough to make him understand the situation.

"When I see yuh ag'in, Sue will be ridin' leg an' leg with me!" Hallock exclaimed, springing astride and rolling the dust toward Main street. Sam Brace, charging along the thoroughfare on his mettlesome nag almost collided with his prospective son-in-law.

"Where'n hell we goin' to head?" Sam barked. "Ain't nobody seen 'em, I reckon, 'nless it was Dixon or McClintock, an' mebbe they was in the party. S'pose we see if we can foller the trail from the alley by Deerin's store."

Hallock was on the point of agreeing to tackle this uncertainty when his nervously roving eye descried a familiar figure on the board sidewalk in front of Spokane Harry's saloon and dance hall.

"Coldiron!" he roared. "See, Sam? An' he's lookin' this way. We'll find out what he knows."

HAPPY HOOFS was so crazy to run that all Hallock had to do was slacken her reins a little and she was off at arrow-speed. In a few jumps the gunfighter was alongside the angular bad man, McClintock; with Sam slashing along in his dust—to be in at the death, if there was one. Holding up the paint mare's head with a firm hand. Hallock leaned from the saddle:

"Mac, I can see from the grin on yuhr ugly mush yuh know what's up. I'd know yuh was lyin' if yuh said yuh didn't. Where's Chalk?"

"He ain't livin' here no more, Trigger. Went over to Pinecreek to get married, an' he ain't comin' back." This Coldiron said with a leer, hands studiously held off from proximity to the guns he packed.

"Here's a cure for that grin o' yuhrs, Mac!" Hallock snarled, and his fist lashed out as he stood up in the stirrups.

Coldiron's head rocked backward and he staggered a few paces and fell, his nose and mouth smashed to bloody pulp. He lay with his head and shoulders in the hoof-marked street, the rest of his body sprawled across the boardwalk, while Hallock lifted the reins and charged away in swirling dust.

"Gone to Pinecreek to get spliced," he bellowed at Brace, as the latter spun his horse about and spurred it to keep pace with Happy Hoofs. "There's a sky pilot there."

"Thirty miles," replied Sam. "Good thing our hosses is fresh."

A Colt boomed behind them. The bullet did not fall anywhere near, but Hallock turned for a brief glance rearward. The bloody-visaged McClintock swayed on his feet on the boardwalk, a smoke-wiping gun in one hand. On a chance, Hallock jerked loose a Colt and fired back; but the range was too long for close shooting at the pace Happy Hoofs was traveling. The last Hallock saw of Coldiron he was still upright.

CHAPTER VI

THE FOOTPATH WAY

"**P**OUND leather!" gritted Hallock as they lopped off a mile of the thirty to Pinecreek. "Might be able to catch up this side if we don't pick no daisies. How's that cayuse o' yuhrs travel, Sam?"

"Burns ground an' will go till he drops, though I reckon yuhr mare has a mite more bottom." Sam was thoroughly alive to Happy Hoof's fine points.

"If I'd thought yuh could've hair-pinned Reckless's hoss. *He* wouldn't let the paint pass him. But yuh'll hafta make out best yuh can."

"Don't hold in for me, Trigger, if I

drop any behind. Sue's the one we're thinkin' of now."

They were sweeping mountainward across a plain tufted with bunch-grass, yellow and dead-looking, and scattered patches of sage-brush.

"Strike yuh odd that Coldiron would tell us where Chalk's headin' for? Don't think he was shootin' us off on the wrong trail, do yuh?" Brace called across to the grimfaced gunfighter.

"No, I reckon he talked straight," opined Hallock, facing his companion. "He figgered Chalk had start aplenty to beat us an' aimed to keep his own hide whole—knew I'd ventilate him short order if he didn't come across. He wouldn't get himself shot up to protect Chalk; ain't that much of a fool."

"I shore hope yuhr dope's correct," said Brace, grabbing at his hat as the wind got under the brim and threatened to lift it.

But Hallock had erred somewhat in judging the reason for Coldiron's willingness to talk; in fact, neither the gunfighter nor Brace had given Chalk Gallatin due credit for the craftiness which existed behind his white mask of a face. They knew he was tricky, but—!

"What's that smoke ahead, d'yuh reckon?" Hallock pointed with his left hand.

They had covered the eight-mile sweep of plain and plunged into a valley of the Cuddy Paw Mountains. The lower slopes were thickly grown with tamarack, red fir and yellow pine, and the men were riding the high trail on the valley's rim, above the timber. But the smoke was not coming from the direction of the trees; it plumed and writhed out and upward from the leaning wall of the valley, right in their path when they should round a bulging shoulder.

"Trigger, it might be anything burn-in'," observed the saloonkeeper. "Tim-

ber's scarce this high up; mostly nothin' but grass. We only got a few yards to go an' then we can see."

"By God!" Hallock swore suddenly, his eyes flaming as the truth flashed home, and striking his saddle-horn with his fist. "By God!" he repeated and showed Brace his distorted face, which awed the saloonkeeper, accustomed as he was to the fiendish twists Hallock could give to his features; "it's the bridge across the valley that's burnin'!" And he thrust in the spurs, somewhat to the paint mare's anger, for she was doing her best.

HALLOCK reached the turn in the trail many yards in advance of Sam Brace and pulled up. What he saw made him tremble with anger, as the unnecessary spurring was making the pinto quiver with a like emotion. The wooden bridge which spanned the valley at this point—fifty feet across was in flames. The thick smoke drifted toward horse and rider, enwrapping them. Happy Hoofs shook her head and her eyes rolled with something akin to fear, but Hallock was grim and statuesque. Brace came along, larruping his mount, while the gunfighter sat thus.

"Yuh might say," he turned on the appalled saloonkeeper, speaking huskily, for the smoke was not without its effect on his vocal cords, "that Chalk burns his bridges behind him."

It was grim humor, considering that the distance to Pinecreek was seventy-five miles by any other trail and that haste was imperative. The bridge, tinder-dry as there had been no rain in that part of Montana for a month or more, had fallen easy prey to flame. To start the fire, Hallock judged that Chalk had piled sun-cured bunch-grass on the far end. The flames had eaten more than halfway across to the side where they sat their horses and the middle, sagging dangerously, gave way

of a sudden and, dragging even the unburned section from its moorings, the whole smoking, flame-shooting mass rattled and crashed seventy feet to the floor of the valley.

"An' the only other route is seventy-five miles, half around the Cuddy Paws!" Sam Brace exclaimed, white-faced. "A burro couldn't make it down this side o' the valley an' yuh'd need wings to go up the other side."

"Chalk shore is a slick article," conceded Hallock. "Easy to see now why Coldiron talked—Chalk told 'im what he was goin' to do, o' course. That Injun, Dixon, maybe with 'em, too, an' he ain't lackin' cunnin'. Might've been his idea. Say, Sam," he shook himself, "no use sittin' here like a coupla bumps on a log. We *got* to find another way across—no time to go down and around."

"Just take the lead an' show me, Trigger. I'm willin' to try anything," replied Sam, who was himself up a stump. "That bridge bein' down cuts off the stage due s'evenin' in Derringer, too."

Hallock did not hear the last. He had lifted Happy Hoof's reins and was ambling on around the winding trail which hugged the almost perpendicular valley wall.

"What's that—another bridge?" Hallock turned a surprise face back upon Brace and pointed ahead when they had ridden a mile or more up the valley. At that distance it certainly did look like another bridge spanning the chasm.

"Can't be—there was only the one." Sam was skeptical, but kept his horse close at the tail-end of Happy Hoofs.

When they got nearer they saw it was the huge trunk of a tree. The valley narrowed at this point to about forty feet, but the drop below was just as great as down by the fallen bridge. The log had not been placed in its present

firm position by accident; the side up-permost had been smoothed off with an ax, making a footpath about four feet in width.

"Must've been used as a foot-bridge by the miners up this way before the gold veins pinched out," Hallock remarked, as they sat their saddle, at gaze. "That other bridge was only built a coupla years, wasn't it?"

"Yeh," said Sam. "But I never knew about this one—never came up this far, because when I went anywhere across the valley, always took the reg'lar bridge. Miners was gone from these parts long before I hit Derringer. That was a minin' camp one time, yuh know."

"Looks as if it'd stood the weather pretty well," Hallock remarked, his eye on the tree-bridge. "Pretty narrow for a hoss, but if any four-legged critter can go across it's Happy Hoofs. The both of us are willin' to try anything once, eh, girl?" patting the sleek neck; "an' for Sue we'd try it twice. Sam, I'm startin'. I'd say a prayer if I knew any."

It was going to be a ticklish feat the gunfighter was well aware. He had tested the paint mare's nerve frequently and always found it good, but not in just this way before. Urged by her master's voice and rein-hand, Happy Hoofs ambled to the tree, then halted and tossed her head as if in misgiving.

"Now, don't be shakin' yuhr head, girl," rebuked Hallock, softly. "Room enough for yuh to put yuhr hoofs if yuh do it dainty an' careful. I'm right with yuh, even if yuh should slip—which yuh ain't a-goin' to. Amble, girl. We're wastin' time."

ONE would have thought from the movement of the paint's ears that she understood every word; her actions manifested her nervousness, but so strong was the love for her rider and her confidence in him, that Happy Hoofs

held back no longer. She stepped cautiously forward, and with Hallock talking to bolster up her courage, covered ten feet or so. Then she hesitated. The dizzy abyss swam underneath.

"Not halfway, yet, girl," spoke the gunfighter, "but if yuh want to rest, go to it. Don't look down, but straight across to where we're goin'."

Presently the paint moved slowly on again. Another ten feet and she stopped. The tree was shaking in a way calculated to freeze the hearts of horse and rider. There was no going back, however; forward was the only course. Hallock thought the motion of the precarious bridge resulted from the strain he and Happy Hoofs were putting on the middle. Partly that was the cause, but there was another. Looking behind, he saw Sam Brace guiding his horse across. The saloon-keeper's face was white; his mount was not doing even as well as Happy Hoofs. It would stop every few feet and swing its head and Sam, evidently, was almost incapable of speech to urge it on. He should have waited until Hallock crossed before starting, and the gunfighter would have spoken to him had he not depended on Sam's common sense. Two horsemen on the log footpath simultaneously might be more pounds of bone and flesh than the seasoned bridge could sustain. But this was not the time nor place to remonstrate. The thing to do was to go on as rapidly as possible and clear the way for Brace. And Happy Hoofs was suddenly averse to going another step. She gazed into nothingness on either side of her and snorted a little. That meant her nerve was failing. Hallock knew the signs.

"Stand still, girl," ordered Hallock in his smoothest tone, resolving suddenly what was best to do. Clinging close to the animal's body and holding

her head up by short-reining, he eased out of the saddle, felt for the tree with one foot, then placed the other beside it. Fortunately Happy Hoofs did not move.

Hallock glanced back at the saloonkeeper, whose mount had balked again, and called in a steady voice, "Better get off an' walk, Sam. Choke the bridle, too, but if yuh feel his hoofs slippin' let go an' save yuhrself."

Sam quavered an unintelligible reply and imitating Hallock's method of dismounting as nearly as he could, got down.

"Now take yuhr time, Sam. It's shaky business, but not so hard, the gunfighter counseled, to steady him; then went to the head of Happy Hoofs and gripping the bridle short, started to lead her.

The mare did not balk now. Where her master could go she could follow—it was application of a bit of horse psychology on Hallock's part—and the firm hand at the bridle heartened the paint; closer and closer loomed safety. Ten feet—five—Hallock and Happy Hoofs tood on terra firma. But the gunfighter could not draw a long breath while Sam was still en route. He faced the log, watching the slow and hesitant progress of man and mount with nerves strung taut. Up until today he had always imagined himself practically nerveless.

"Welcome to earth, Sam!" the gunfighter exclaimed in a voice tinged with relief, as Sam and his horse stepped to safety. "Foolish for yuh to start right after me, but—" He hardly had the heart to be harsh with the man, he was patently so near collapse, and now that the danger was past. "That was a nerve-tickler, wasn't it, huh? When I die I want my boots to be off, yessir!" A wish which would never have been fulfilled had he continued to hell-pal-around with Reckless Brule.

FOR answer the saloonkeeper dropped his horse's reins and stretched himself flat on the ground and closed his eyes. Hair-trigger accorded his silent sympathy. His own nerves tingled uncomfortably at the remembrance of how the bottom of the valley looked from the middle of the bridge, how out-of-reach firm ground seemed.

"Yuh're as white as Chalk, almost," he addressed the shut-eyed Brace, "an' mebbe I ain't so nut-brown myself."

"Wish I had four fingers o' XXX to start my heart pumpin' ag'in," said Sam slowly. "Systems full o' floatin' icebergs. I ain't even sweatin'."

Hallock laughed and sat down on a rock. "Take yuhr time but don't take too long."

Sam opened his eyes and got up immediately. Sue needed him just as soon as he could reach her. How could he have forgotten for a moment and lingered? He was in the saddle ahead of Hallock, swiftly impatient to be off. The gunfighter swung to Happy Hoofs and they headed back to the place where the far end of the bridge had rested. Way below them they saw the charred and broken timbers still smoking. Following the broad road around the valley wall, which was used by the stage as well as horsemen, they gradually descended and flicked through a pass at the base of the Cuddy Paws.

They sailed into Pinecreek at a thundering gallop, drawing many an anxious female eye to curtained windows, for it was not infrequently that desperadoes from Derringer painted red their quiet neighbor town, despising its tendency to be law-abiding; and Pinecreek had had a very recent scare. Eagerly the eyes of the two-man posse sought among the horses hitched in the street for a glimpse of a hammer-headed bay. That would be Chalk Gallatin's cayuse.

"Hey, pop, where's yuhr preacher

peg his hat?" Hallock yelled at a long-whiskered party who was making a doughty stand in front of the general store while his cronies fled at the advent of the hardriding Derringer man.

"Up there, next to the church," retorted the old man, pointing with his cane. "If yuh'd ride in decent once in awhile an' git some gospel, yuh wouldn't have to ask."

"O' course he'd be livin' near the church—where else?" Hallock said to Brace, half-grinning and ignoring the Pinecreeker's broadside. "Tell yuh the truth I'd forgot there was one—an' that a church comes in the same package with a preacher."

They reined toward the lowly parsonage at the other end of Pinecreek's main street, adjoining the log-and-frame church. But no horses were visible outside and Sam's face showed deep disappointment.

"If he's been here he's gone on—that burned bridge broke the trail for us," groaned Brace, who, unaccustomed to much riding, was already saddle-galled, and almost pop-eyed with anxiety for his daughter's safety. As for Hallock he was as full of energy as if he had never been sick and his late wound was entirely out of his mind. He was prepared not to find Sue and her abductor in Pinecreek, therefore did not experience the deep disappointment that his companion did. And if Sue was Mrs. Gallatin—a likelihood—she would be a widow the minute he could get near enough to Chalk to sling a gun.

Determined to learn the worst at once and, incidentally, any other information the preacher possessed which would aid pursuit, Hallock flung Happy Hoofs reins over her head and approached the door of the parsonage.

"Stay in the saddle," he called back over his shoulder, as Sam kicked off a stirrup, "we're only here a minute."

A THIN, pale woman responded to Hallock's knuckle tattoo; her pallor, he divined, was not natural, but the outward sign of inward trepidation. He imagined himself the cause at first, well aware of his forbidding aspect.

"I ain't meanin' a mite o' harm, ma'am," he reassured the lady. "I'm just aimin' for to get a li'l' information. Is the preacher about?"

"He's—he's inside," she tremblingly replied. "I'm his wife. It wasn't you who frightened me—it was the man who was here awhile ago and—and shot my husband. No, he isn't dead," she hastened to say, as Hallock started, suspecting he could give the killer a name. "Wounded in the arm. The doctor says he'll be all right."

"Was the feller who did it a tallish sorta cowboy cuss with a face as white as a Hereford's—an' was a strappin'—I mean, ma'am, a *big*, dark-haired girl with him?"

Mrs. Saunders, the preacher's wife, answered affirmatively, as he had scarcely doubted she would. She looked him straight in the eye, seemed on the point of saying something, then hesitated. Fear struck him, turning him cold.

"Anything the matter with the girl, ma'am—she's my promised wife an' it'd shore kill me, tough as I am, to have anything happen to her. Just speak out, ma'am, an' lemme know the worst."

Mrs. Saunders marveled that his hardlined face could express such anxiety over the welfare of another. He looked like a man who would ride blithely through hell and bulldog the devil if necessary—all whalebone and rawhide and utterly careless of himself; but not a man who could feel genuine apprehension. Yet there it was, stark in his steely eyes.

"Lady," implored Hallock, lifting a hand when she did not reply immedi-

ately, he mistaking the reason. Sam Brace, sitting near at hand and an agonized listener, was ready to go through the motions of assault and battery if she didn't answer soon.

"Pardon me for staring," apologized Mrs. Saunders, though Hallock hadn't noticed she was. "The girl was—well, she's quite large and strong you know, and it looked to me as if she had fought the man strenuously and he had—ah—beaten her with a quirt butt to subdue her. There was blood on one side of her face, she was black and blue, and she seemed exhausted to the point where she could no longer resist and the man had to help her along. He was bruised and scratched himself—"

"God Almighty!" shouted Hallock, thereby horrifying Mrs. Saunders. "Yuh hearin' all this, Sam?" whirling; and satisfied at once by the bloated appearance of the father's face. "We're out for that wolf's pelt, ma'am," he panted, turning again to the preacher's wife. "That's the girl's daddy, hangin' to his horn. So yuhr husband didn't marry 'em none? How come?"

"Mrs. Saunders knew something was wrong, of course, as soon as he saw their condition, especially the girl's. The cowboy—beast, I should say—"

"An' yuh never spoke truer, ma'am," Hallock was guilty of interrupting, his eyes glittering.

"Ordered Mr. Saunders to get his book," continued the woman, as if Hallock had not spoken, "and the girl, who was very near swooning, declared she would *not* be married to him. The man saw Mr. Saunders was going to balk and drew his gun and commanded, 'Do as I say! If you don't I'll kill you.' Mr. Saunders told him to shoot and he did—but only in the arm. Bad enough, of course, and I fainted, thinking my husband had been killed. When I came to they were gone."

"Then," said Hallock, on a note of

disappointment, "yuh dunno which way they headed? Mebbe, though," his gloom lifting a trifle, "some other Pine-crackers saw—"

"My husband can tell you which direction they took. He ran out after them, wounded as he was, and tried to get some men to pursue them, but—" She paused, flushing with sudden shame.

"Couldn't, eh?" snarled Hallock, startling her by his vicious look and tone. "Not a man with the guts to go, huh? Say, I'd admire to turn this snivellin' burg topside. Derringer may not be so lily-white as Pinecreek, but it's got all the guts an' gall—no, ma'am, parding, but it ain't. I was forgettin' yuhr husband. Might I see him?"

"Yuh hurry up, hear me?" bawled the anguished Sam Brace after Hallock as Mrs. Saunders stood aside for him to enter. "My God, think o' that honey-girl o' mine all beat up by that Goddam son—"

MRS. SAUNDERS closed the door. She led the hatless gunfighter into a dim little library, where the preacher, minus his coat and with bandaged arm in sling, half reclined in an armchair.

"I want," said Hallock, giving the Rev. Saunders his name when Mrs. Saunders turned inquiringly, "to shake yuhr hand, sir, an' tell yuh yuh've altered my idea o' preachers, which before wasn't none flatterin'. Yuh helped my girl best yuh could an' I'm yuhr friend for life."

"Here's my hand, Mr. Hallock," said the preacher, raising his good one, "and I'm glad to have earned your good opinion. Sorry I couldn't stop the abduction—it was that, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Now, reverend, one thing more: which way'd they head?"

"North."

"Thanks, reverend; get yuhrself in shape soon. I'll be comin' back this

way with the girl an' she'll be plumb ready to say 'I do.'"

He wheeled and almost ran from the house. "North!" he shouted at Sam Brace as he hit the saddle.

CHAPTER VII

HALLOCK SEES RED

"SHOW'S we're on the right trail, all right. That's shore his bay!" Hair-trigger up beside the inert carcass of a horse, lying just off-trail, its hind legs sticking from a clump of bushes. The dead animal was equipped with all its leather gear.

Hallock and Brace were five miles out of Pinecreek and had followed the main-traveled trail due north, not certain they were on the right track, although the Reverend Saunders had seen Chalk and Sue depart in that direction, until they encountered the body of Gallatin's horse. Slipping quickly from Happy Hoofs and crashing into the brush, Hallock found on examination that the bay had broken its right fore-leg just above the fetlock, stepped in a hole somewhere, which resulted in its being shot.

"That slows him up considerable," said Sam hopefully, as Hallock strode out of the bushes reporting. "His one hoss'll hafta carry double now. It's a cinch Blackfoot Dixon didn't decamp with him or he'd been along o'Chalk in Pinecreek, don't yuh think?"

"Yeh," nodded Hallock absently. He wasn't caring whether Dixon—or a dozen of his breed—was ahead of him, so long as he reached end of trail in the shortest time Happy Hoofs could carry him. He was squatting over the trail, looking for the hoofmarks of Gallatin's remaining horse, the one Sue had been riding at the start. Hallock

was not as good at trail-finding as he was squinting over a gunsight, nor was Brace any better, his specialties being shotgun expertness and the mixing of drinks; but it required little more than good eyesight to pick out the deeper indentations of shoes, telltale of extra weight put upon the horse.

"We can be shore, Sam," said Hallock, rising and lifting foot to stirrup, "that we're on his track now. Trail's as open as print. An' he can't be so far away now."

They pointed out, following the deep hoofmarks. These led at a tangent from the road north; finally circled and strung south.

"He's doublin' back," Hallock remarked, leaning over his horse's shoulder as he galloped. "My guess is he's makin' for the Cuddy Paws, where he figgers to hole up. Only about a thousand places to hide in them mountains. Losin' that hoss, he had to change his plans. Can't reach 'em before night, though, slow as he's hittin' it, an' we oughta catch him."

The heartening words, however, did not smooth the wrinkles of worry from Sam's brow. What the thwarted and desperate Gallatin might do to Sue was an uncertainty which kept his nerves strung to the breaking point. "I ain't used to callin' on God except to damn me or my enemies," said the saloon-keeper, "but I'm askin' Him to protect Sue."

"Yuh sound religious as hell, Sam," commented Hallock, and was serious.

They flung down a coulee with their horses at full stride, Sam's mount scampering at the tail of Happy Hoofs, and emerging from the mouth of the dry ravine found themselves on the stage trail. Involuntarily Hallock lifted his eyes from the ground, glancing south, and fires of mingled hate and joy kindled in his heart. He shouted, no words, just shouted; and Sam Brace,

seeking the cause of the outburst, echoed him, and got a head start of Happy Hoofs by a wicked plunge of the spurs. In the next moment or two, however, Hallock passed him, leaning into the wind like a cyclone.

HALF a mile down the stage road the battered and bullet-scarred old Concord, preserved from early mining days in the region, was halted; the driver was leaning over his seat, evidently arguing with Chalk Gallatin, who stood just beneath him. Near the coach a horse with low-hanging head swayed on its last legs. It fell over suddenly. At the roadside. Sue sat upon a rock, her head bowed upon her arms crossed on her knees. While Hallock and Brace sped nearer and nearer, Chalk Gallatin abruptly pulled his gun and pointed it up at the driver, who was evidently obstinate about something. The driver's hands slowly arose to a level with his hat-brim. Whether Chalk intended to pull trigger, anyhow, was problematical, for at that instant he heard the charging horses and whirled. The stage driver lowered his hands and stared.

Hallock, racing now far in advance of Brace clung with his knees and yanked up both guns. Simultaneously the tubes threw bullets, but the range was too great for anything but a high-powered rifle. At the roar of the guns, Sue Brace's head came up and she stood, waving feebly; but evidently the effort was too much for her snapped powers, for she sank again upon the rock.

With the avenger closing in, Chalk Gallatin, realizing the futility of standing up to him, did the unexpected. Sheathing his gun, he sprang suddenly over the coach wheel to the box and wrestling an instant with the driver, taken entirely unawares by the cowboy's maneuver, hurled the old man off

the high seat to the ground. Chalk then seized the reins from the foot-board, snatched the lash from the whip-socket and cracked the leaders into a sudden plunge. The wheelers were jerked along and getting their feet, imitated the pace set by the frightened team in front.

Happy Hoofs, spurting valiantly, shot by Sue and the cursing stage driver, as the latter was picking himself from the dust, a most amazed man to find no bones broken. So intent was Hallock on overtaking his quarry that he never looked Sue's way as he passed her. Her father, pounding up some minutes later, was out of the saddle before his mount had stopped running. He dashed for the girl, horrified by her appearance. She arose, took several faltering steps and was clasped in his arms.

Hair-Trigger drew near enough to the racing stagecoach to shoot Chalk off his perch if he so desired. Chalk realized what an inviting target he was atop the stage and was leaning over as far as he could, the reins wrapped around his arms, high heels planted firmly against the foot-board. But Hallock's guns were suddenly stilled and Gallatin wondered why—couldn't be the gunfighter had run out of ammunition. As a matter of fact, Hallock had changed his mind about the method of killing his enemy. A bullet would be too ordinary, too easy. His bare hands must do the job.

To do this he must first get Chalk alive in his hands, which presented a problem. The coach was whirling along a trail that stretched almost level for several miles toward the Cuddy Paw Mountains. Chalk was high-lining the four-in-hand and really wasting energy, for they had the bits in their teeth and would not have slowed up for a precipice in their path. It occurred to Hallock first, of course, to shoot the stage

horses, but this, as a lover of horse-flesh and not from any reluctance to destroy property of the Sundown Stage Company, he hated to do except as a last resort.

HAPPY HOOFS, grabbing ground as if she had not been run hard all afternoon, thrust her nose past the coach window. Hallock pondering the problem of how to stop the stage and nail his quarry, glanced involuntarily at the rapid-turning wheels. His guns, swinging from the loose grip of his hands against his legs, came swiftly into position, aimed low. They began to roar, a continuous volley. Hands that never missed were streaming those bullets and the spokes in the revolving rear wheels were split and broken by the hard-driven lead. The fellows, denied the support of most of the spokes, slewed suddenly at a forty-five degree angle and the coach lurched to one side, like a drunkard thrown off balance. The ruined wheel lay down and the hub, striking the ground, dragged along it several yards before the four-in-hand gave up pulling. But Chalk Gallatin was no longer on the driver's box. Puzzlement found place beside Chalk's cold fear when Hallock's Colts began their incessant pounding which emptied both cylinders—what was the man shooting at? He had never been known to waste lead—and then the question was answered by the sidewise lunge of the furiously driven Concord. Chalk, keyed up to take any chance, even the slimmest, swung down from the leaning coach on the offside, a second or two before it completely stopped. Either side of the stage road was a steep embankment, covered with brush the height of a man's shoulder and thick and tangled like jungle growth. Chalk, without hesitation, sprang from the edge of the road into this gray and brown and yellow maze

and headed straight down, he cared not where, so long as he escaped his nemesis.

Hallock saw Chalk's figure whisk off the box, but could not have shot at him if he would—he had shaken every load from his guns in demolishing the wheel. He heard the crashing of the brush as the "bad" cowpuncher drove into it; the gunfighter spilled the twelve empty shells on the ground, shoved fresh cartridges into the chambers, then swung off Happy Hoofs and headed around the end of the coach. He was cautious about showing himself on the edge of the bank for the good reason that, although it had taken him but a few seconds to reload, the noise of Gallatin's descent had abruptly ceased, and it suggested that he was lying in wait for Hallock's figure to loom above him. Finding the proverbial needle in the haystack would have been child's play compared to locating Chalk on the brushy slope without exposing oneself. Hallock stood only a few minutes irresolute, racking his brains to hit upon some scheme which would reduce the high degree of danger; not that he was afraid, but he would have deemed it a disgrace to be killed by Chalk Gallatin, especially with his vengeance unsatisfied. But the horns of the dilemma retained their needle-point at the end of the five minutes, and, abandoning all attempt at caution, which was useless anyway, he charged, yelling and brandishing his Colts into the brush.

A six-shooter bellowed, about thirty yards down. Hallock fell on his face. Not because he had been struck, however. He had tripped over a boulder which lay well hidden in the thicket tangle. He did not curse as he raised himself on his hands, his fingers still twined about the gun-grips; that rock, possibly, had been a providential stumbling block in his path, saved him a drilling—and something else! This was

on second thought, as he sat up and looked at the boulder. It was fairly round. Likely it would roll, considering the pitch of the slope. By ear alone had Hallock located Gallatin's position, and it was far from being a reliable impression; he had fallen ere he could glimpse the weapon's smoke, which would have registered it exactly. The thought that came to him as he looked at the boulder and noted its roundness, he carried out immediately. With one hand he gave it a good start down the slope in the general direction of the roaring gun. It met with stout resistance from the underbrush, but because of the start given it and its own weight, was able to smash all obstacles.

HALLOCK crawled after the rolling boulder, keeping in the path it crushed, confident that any noise he made would be drowned out by the snap and crunch and swish of twigs and branches. Chalk's gun suddenly boomed out again, not ten feet away, and Hallock heard him curse. He had fired at the boulder, then discovered what he was shooting at and naturally felt foolish. But the boulder had accomplished all that Hallock had expected of it, drawn Chalk's fire and simultaneously covered Hallock's approach to the cowboy's vantage-point. The gunfighter sprang up and ran those last ten feet, trusting to luck that neither rocks nor roots would trip him this time. The steepness of the slope caused him to descend in long, staggering leaps and he would be at a distinct disadvantage when he came upon the cowboy and tried to stop suddenly. The next instant the white face of Gallatin flashed upon Hallock's vision; the puncher was on his knees, eyes fastened upon the point in the brush where he thought Hallock would break through. The gunfighter saw Chalk's six-shooter swing up for the throw-down as he

dashed upon him; Hallock's left hand gun spouted smoky flame and lead, the bullet tearing the cowboy's gun from his fingers, the gun with the notch for Hallock!

Hair-Trigger ran several feet beyond the kneeling Gallatin before he could stop himself. He whirled and sprang back up the slope, dropping his guns, just as Chalk was reaching with his left hand for the fallen iron, the fingers of his right being momentarily paralyzed from the shock of the bullet on the cylinder. Chalk didn't realize, in the cold frenzy of the moment, that his enemy's lead had jammed the cylinder and the Colt was of no use, except as a club. Armed with a clug against the vengeance-thirsting Hallock—as well to stab him with a blade of grass! But Chalk's eager, curving fingers never closed on that tantalizing Colt-handle—a powerful tug at the back of his shirt collar lifted him from his knees; then he was hurled flat on his back and Hallock dropped astride him, driving the breath from his body and seemingly crushing his ribs. Before he could regain his breath, the gunfighter's steel fingers, like the gouging talons of an eagle, were fastened in his throat.

"Yuh woman-beater, yuh damned, skulkin' coyote!" roared Hallock in the tones of a temporary madman. "A bullet was too good, too quick to buck yuh out, but these bare hands o' mine shore fit yuhr scruffy neck. I got a mind," the terrible fingers tightened, the eyes with the dancing devil in them drilled into the glazing glance of Gallatin, "to tear yuhr windpipe plumb out!"

The cowboy's hands instinctively, but weakly, futile, pushed against Hallock's heaving chest. To the right wrist was slung Chalk's quirt and the loaded end, uppermost, caught Hair-Trigger's eye. It was coated a dark-brown, the color of dried blood. If possible, Hallock went madder than ever at the

sight.

"Sue's blood!" he screamed—a horrible sound, like the cry of a mortally wounded horse — and he pounded Chalk's head up and down on the ground. Then suddenly he took his hands from the cowboy's throat and grew dangerously quiet. Chalk sucked in the life-giving air with mouth agape. "Get yuhrself together, yuh woman-rustler!" snarled the gunfighter, bending forward until their faces almost touched. "I'm a-goin' to quirt-bust yuh like yuh did Sue Brace before I stop yuhr clock!"

When Chalk's breathing became less labored—Hallock sitting on his chest and watching the signs like a cruel-eyed eagle—the gunfighter tore the quirt from Gallatin's wrist and heaved up.

"On yuhr feet, now!" he rasped. "Take it standin' like a man—no!" he snorted, "not like a *man*, but stand up anyhow, yuh lowflung, woman-handlin' hound!"

CHALK levered himself to a sitting posture with his hands spread wide on either side of him. He knew that he must get up, that there was no escape; yet he had not the courage to gather his feet under him.

"I said *up!*" bellowed the avenger. "Well, I'll shore help yuh then!" when Gallatin still sat and stared, speechless, and with hand gripping the front of his shirt, yanked Chalk erect on his wobbly legs. "Damn'!" swore Hallock, surveying the cringing figure, "if yuh ain't a sight to sicken a body!"

He stepped backward to where he had let his guns fall and, eyes never wavering from the face of the man he intended in the end to kill, stooped and slid one Colt in the holster on his left leg; and, with the other in his hand, he walked over to his enemy.

"Yuhr iron," said Hallock, shoving his own in Chalk's empty holster, "is

smashed to hell. I'm heelin' yuh to see if yuh've got the guts to dig for cannon while I'm beatin' yuh—an' if yuh have, well, go for it an' I'll show yuh!"

But the fact that a sweet-shooting weapon had been put under his hand didn't hearten Gallatin much. He was barely able to stand from fear and weakness, let alone rise to the supreme demands of the occasion.

"Yuh're sayin' I beat Sue Brace," quavered Chalk, not knowing what else to say, his wits were so jumbled, an eye of dread on the lash Hallock was pulling slowly through his fingers in wicked anticipation, "but I didn't, Hallock, I—"

"That's for lyin'!" snarled Hair-Trigger, and cut him across the face, the course of the thongs marked in blood-red welts on the dead white skin. Involuntarily tears sprang to Chalk's eyes; he yelped. "That shore matches the scratches Sue put on yuhr mush tryin' to get away from yuh!" the avenger declared, pleased with the result. "But I've only just started!"

With all the vigor of his arm he attacked Gallatin's head and shoulders. The stinging, biting, rawhide trailed one long welt after another across the pale visage, until it was no longer pale but had the appearance of fine-chopped meat. Chalk's hands and wrists were laid open, his sleeves torn ragged, from trying to shield his face. Pain-madened at last to the point of forgetting his fear, he suddenly dropped his arms and screaming curses to with a man, grabbed for the Colt. Hallock's red-rimmed eyes glinted—with what emotion it would have been hard to say; possibly a fiendish joy that he had whipped his cowardly foe into showing resistance. Chalk had the gun almost clear of the open-mouther holster when Hallock, shifting his grip on the quirt, crashed the loaded end on the cowboy's head, unprotected, as his sombrero had

fallen off at the time the gunfighter threw and choked him. A second time Gallatin fell, on his side, arms outflung, entirely relaxed. The gun he had tried to draw stuck half out of the scabbard; Hallock bent, jerked it up and thrust it in his own. Blood from the wound inflicted by the butt-end blow coursed rapidly down Chalk's countenance and dripped from his chin.

"Mrs. Saunders, that Gospel-slinger's wife, spoke o' Sue's face bein' bloody, yuh yellow cur," Hallock remarked to the insensible man, "an' so's yuhrs, to play hunk."

HE THREW away the quirt and drew a sleeve across his sweating face, feeling the effect of his strenuous session; but he was not yet free from the spell of the ugly nightmare driving him to the consummation of his vengeance. Chalk continued to lie without movement and Hallock well knew that he was not shamming unconsciousness. After a long moment the gunfighter reached down, clamped iron fingers on one of Chalk's wrists and dragged him like a sack of meal, trudged up the slope along the trail blazed by the rolling boulder.

Lugging his limp burden over the edge of the bank and around the end of the coach, Hallock propped the cowboy, in sitting position, against the front wheel. Choking Gallatin to death, after trying it nearly to completion, had appealed to Hallock as being as prosaic as shooting—and he recalled the killing of an Indian horse thief which he had witnessed in his younger days, around Deadwood Gulch. A fitting death for Chalk Gallatin, yellow-spined bully, bushwacker and woman-stealer, too!

Happy Hoofs came walking toward her master, whickering softly as if inquiring the reason for his prolonged absence. But Hallock had no affectionate

pat or word for her now. He was in the clutch of that temporary insanity which, when proven, sometimes means to a murderer the difference between a life sentence and the electric chair or hangman's noose. Unfastening his coiled lariat from the tie-straps on the saddle, Hallock returned to the side of his victim, whose head hung forward, and gong down on one knee, fitted the hamper noose around his neck. Then he squatted on his heels in front of Gallatin, waiting for his senses to revive. He would have assisted Chalk out of his oblivious state but no water was handy, nor had Hallock a pocket flask. Well, he could wait, he had to bide his time until he got his hands on this damned coyote; a few minutes longer wouldn't matter. Happy Hoofs, inquisitive, missing her due caresses, sidled up back of Hallock and chewed his loosely knotted neckerchief; then playfully nipped his ear. But he did not respond, which, as well as anything, manifested his mental state. He just squatted there, immobile all but his eyes, like some grim demon.

Presently Chalk stirred, groaned; then he moved his head a little; the rope did not exert anything like a throttling pressure but it was tight, and the feel of it at his throat did more than a dash of cold water in the face to bring back consciousness. His eyes snapped open—to stare into the Satanic countenance of Hair-Trigger.

"Been waitin'." said Hallock, locanically; he straightened.

Both of Chalk's hands went up to the tight hemp and he pulled at it, shrieking, "Rope! Good Lord, Trigger, yuh goin' to hang me?"

"Yuh'll only wish I was," replied Hallock. "I'm goin' to—drag yuh!"

Chalk raved. "An' I always was afear'd o' rope!"

"Yuh're scared like a coyote pup at everything, deep down, 'ceptin' mebbe

women, defenseless women. That don't inclue Sue Brace. Yuh had to go some, go the limit, by God, to get a-holt her. That's why, the way yuh treated *her*, I'mb makin' yuh die hard. If 'twas only revenge for myself I'd put a bullet in yuh an' call it hunk."

Chalk Gallatin burst into unmanly tears, his teeth clicking with nervous chill. His head had stopped bleeding, but the half-dried blood imparted to the sudden flood of tears its sanguine hue, and the side of his face which had been decorated only with quirt-welts, became streaked and crisscrossed apparently with fresh gore. He was a spectacle such as might have aroused the sympathy, a spark at least, of most women, and many men, but not the tough-fibred Hallock, whose brute nature was so strongly developed. Nothing but disgust, plus hatred, had he for the wreck of a man against the wheel.

"Trigger — yuh — yuh," blubbered Chalk, tugging on the hondo to pull the noose loose, "yuh won't—shoot—me—then?"

HALLOCK deemed it unnecessary to repeat that he wouldn't; he had passed sentence; he was judge and jury of this court. All he said was: "No use jiggerin' with that rope an' gettin' it loose. I'll only put it on ag'in. Dunno any prayers, do yuh, Gallatin?"

"Trigger," slavered Chalk, knowing that the prayer-stage meant the end, "if yuh won't shoot—gimme—a gun an' I'll kill myself. Rather than the rope, Trigger—I'll do it."

"Yuh," sneered Hallock, "ain't got the nerve!" Then he changed his mind, dropped into his former position facing Chalk. "It'd be better'n draggin' yuh, damned if it wouldn't, to watch yuh work up that much guts. Try yuh—it's yuhr last chance remember. Here!" He slid a Colt from one holster, shov-

ing the butt at the cowpuncher.

Chalk clasped the handle and turned the blued steel muzzle against his forehead. The hammer lifted slowly as the finger on the trigger exerted slow pressure. Then the hammer gently lowered. Chalk brought the muzzle down in range of his eyes and looked into it long, visioning the burst of fire which would explode in his brain—an instant of terrible light and sound, then complete darkness. He shivered and drew an oath from Hallock. He thought then of the rope tearing at his neck, his face being smashed by rocks, his whole body mangled, heart and brain active the while, too long a while—and he jammed the cold ring again to his head. The hammer rose; the hammer fell—but he jerked the barrel up, so that the bullet whined upward harmlessly. He tossed the gun at Hallock's feet with an animal cry:

"I can't—do it! I ain't fit to die!"

Hallock filled the empty chamber; he holstered the Colt. He got to his feet. "Yuh ain't got the nerve to die, yuh mean. Yuh'll never be fitter. C'mon, I'm done foolin'."

The gunfighter reached over, jerked the noose tight and Chalk to his feet simultaneously. Hallock did not have to call Happy Hoofs; she was right at his elbow, a perplexed spectator. Keeping the rope on his victim's neck taut, Hallock hooked his left boot-toe in the stirrup and swung up. The mare started at a lope as soon as she felt her master in the saddle, and Chalk, grasping the line with both hands to ease the strain on his neck, ran behind. Hallock increased Happy Hoof's pace with a word, at the same time paying out the lariat until he had only a few feet left on the home end, which he twirled on the saddle-horn. Chalk was running now at top speed, his feet scarcely seeming to touch the ground, his eyes protruding. Happy Hoofs galloped.

Gallatin was jerked off his legs and struck the trail asprawl and was dragged like a sled. He uttered no sound, though maddened with pain; could not for the reason that his mouth was choked with earth and pebbles. Gradually his hold on the taut line, which he had retained with desperation and despair for many hundred yards, loosened, and his arms jerked along lifelessly.

Hallock was picking the roughest places in the road to ride over, heading back to the spot where Chalk had stopped the stage and then stolen it. The distance was a mile or more. Hallock could see a horseman approaching, Sam Brace, no doubt despatched by his daughter to learn what was detaining the gunfighter. Far beyond Sam, Hallock could see Sue and the stage driver standing together in the road.

CHAPTER VIII

THICK OF THE FIGHT

AS SAM rode nearer, Hallock slackened the pace of Happy Hoofs. "So that's how yuh finished him, huh?" said Brace, his eyes on the pitiful object at the end of the gunfighter's rope. "Well, it's a terrible death, but he shore earned it. Hold up, Trigger," for Hallock was riding on, "he's dead *an'* yuh might's well unhitch him. Sue's stummick ain't weak, but he ain't exactly a pretty sight."

Hallock drew rein. He climbed down and walked back to the bloody, ragged wreck. Sam edged his horse in and was nauseated by what he saw.

"Say, yuh didn't only drag him, did yuh, Trigger!" he exclaimed. "I'm mighty glad I stopped yuh from draggin' him up to Sue. Say, she'd bawl yuh aplenty for this."

Hallock, while freeing the noose, which was deeply embedded in Chalk's neck, related the details of his encounter with Sue's abductor. "For every blow he give her I cut an' slashed him twice, I betche—an' I ain't seen her yet!" the two-gun man declared, passionately, rising and beginning to coil up his rope.

"Yuh're a devil when yuh get started, Trigger," breathed Sam. "I wouldn't want yuh should be campin' on my trail."

"Yuh think I done wrong?" Hallock demanded, looking at the saloonkeeper squarely out of eyes that were still flecked with red. "She's yuhr daughter an' yuh was just as hot as me to pull him down."

"I ain't sayin' yuh was wrong—that's yuhr way, Trigger," replied Sam calmly. "I'd 'a' shot him—'nless he got me first—that's what I'd done, an' left out the fancy work. But the way yuh did it was yuhr way, yuh was seein' red—'nough said."

"Is Sue hurt much?" asked Hallock.

Brace nodded. "Well, yes—but not serious, yuh savvy. He knocked her plumb out once; in the store, after he'd socked Deerin'. When she come to she was layin' across his saddle. Said he'd let her ride the hoss he was leadin' an' leave her hands ontied if she'd promise to go peaceable. She promised, an' kept it till she felt stronger; then warned him she was goin' to break it an' fought 'im tooth'n nail. But he was too strong for her, strong as she is. She didn't know nothin' about the burnin' o' the bridge as they'd got past that before she got her senses back. When they rode into Pinecreek, Chalk threatened to kill her if she asked anybody for help—an' she says he'd done it, too. She was so weak she could hardly set in the saddle—"

"I'm damn' glad," struck in Hallock, vibrantly, "that Gallatin lingered to

know he was gettin' killed. A quick bullet he didn't deserve. Yuh oughta be thankin' me, Sam, 'stead o' findin' fault."

"Mebbe, mebbe," said the saloonkeeper, slowly nodding. "Whatcha goin' to do with the body?" as the two-gun man strode to the pinto and tied up his coiled rope.

"Leave it to the buzzards!" barked Hallock. He tilted his head back and scanned the blue vault. "There," he cried, pointing to several wheeling objects, "is some a'ready!"

Sam shook his head. When the gunfighter mounted and lifted the reins, Sam followed him.

"Tom!" cried Sue, as he galloped up and flung down.

HE DID not speak at first. Gathered her in his arms, held her close—then at arm's length. Long he gazed upon the bruises and marks of the quirtlash and the bloodstains, which Sue had not washed off because there was no water.

"I paid Chalk Gallatin for all this," he touched her cheek gently with one finger. He dropped his hands from her shoulders and gave her his profile. "Yuhr pa kicked some about it. He didn't cotton to the way I killed him." He told the manner of Chalk's passing. "Not tryin' to excuse myself," he declared at the end. "I got wild—there's more'n a li'l devil in my system, Sue. I reckon I'm just a barber—yuh know what I mean, girl."

"Barbarian? Yes, you are. One side of your nature is savage, but there's another side, the side you've shown to me, the same that made you take off your guns after Reckless—died. And, Tom, if it's in the wood I'm going to develop that better nature. I do not love you for that killing instinct, but in spite of it."

"That love will cure me, if anything."

He was facing her now, his eyes no longer bloodshot, the savageery eradicated. "Now that I'm cooled off, I feel—well, not sorry exactly, but—" He halted, groping for the words to properly express himself.

"Now, when you're not blind with murderous rage you feel ashamed of your unnecessary cruelty, for having tortured him like—well, like Blackfoot Dixon, who has Indian blood, would have done. Isn't that what you mean?"

"I reckon it is. Shore wonderful how yuh can read me."

She laid one hand on his shoulder and with the other pointed down-trail. "Is that Chalk lying there in the road? Must be, of course, for the buzzards are dropping down. You meant to leave him for them—but don't you think better of it, Tom?"

He nodded. "I'll bury him. Got no shovel or anything, but a niche in the rocks somewheres an' other rocks piled on top will cheat the buzzards an' coyotes. Sit down, Sue, an' rest till I come back." He turned to Happy Hoofs.

"How about my hearse, Hallock?" spoke up the stage driver, Rafe Seddon, who, with Sam Brace had kept silence and in the background until this moment. "The old rattlebank looks broke down from here, though it's a good ways."

"I leaded up one wheel for yuh to trump the getaway," Hallock informed him. "Reckon yuh'll hafta bring another wheel from Pinecreek before yuh can finish yuhr run. An' the bridge is down across the valley. Yuh'll hafta drive around the Cuddy Paws till another's put up. How did we—oh, Sam and me used that log foot-bridge. You bet we ain't goin' to cross it ag'in though; not hossback anyway."

"I'll be gosh-fried!" Seddon exploded. "Sam," he turned to the saloonkeeper, "loan me yuhr nag, will

yuh, till I go down an' look the hearse over an' roundup my hosses. Yuhr daughter can ride yuhrs then an' yuh can fork one o' mine—or Hallock, whichever. Be dark long before we hit Pinecreek an' I'll bring out that wheel-to-morrer. Double damn' that Chalk Gallatin—but he's dead an' gone now, dead as his hoss there. Know what he wanted me to do?" as Brace got to the ground and tossed him the reins. "Why, take him an' yuhr daughter as far as the Cuddy Paws, 'cause his hoss had give out an' he hankered to reach the mountains before dark. What he was a-doin' with her, an' her all battered up, got me goin', an' I told him so plumb plain. At which he sticks a gun onder my nose an' warns me not to be too inquirin'. Then yuh fellers heaved along. S'prised I didn't break my neck or my back when Gallatin chucked me off the seat."

"I was wonderin' why he'd held yuh up, Rafe," said Hallock, who had lingered to listen.

"So was I," chimed in Brace, "but I forgot to ask."

HALLOCK and Seddon clattered off together. Not long after Seddon returned with his horses, mounted on one of the four. Hallock had left the rein-dangling Happy Hoofs at one side of the road and gone down the embankment, carrying the mangled clay of Chalk Gallatin. Twenty minutes later he reappeared over the edge of the bank and, loping back, reported to the one woman that Gallatin was safe forever from scavengers. He then insisted that she ride the paint mare, while he bestrode one of the stage horses and with Sam and Seddon and the extra animals bringing up the rear, Hallock and Sue set the pace Pinecreek-ward.

Arriving after dark, Hallock said to Sue as he drew rein in front of the general store. "Yuh're shore yuh feel all

right to go through with it now?"

Her "Yes!" was vibrant.

"Then there's no use puttin' it off. If yuh're willin' to take a chance on a cashless good-for-nothing' like me, who even has to borrow money for a weddin' ring from his father-in-law—" He paused, then added: "But I'll be able to pay him back for that soon's we get to Derringer. Reckless—pore old Reckless—won't never need his hoss an' outfit ag'in an' he'd want I should have what I can get for 'em. It'll be enough, shore, to buy railroad tickets for two to some place where I ain't known an' can start over—but what at? I dunno nothin' but gunfightin'. Sue Brace," he had dismounted and stood at the head of Happy Hoofs, looking up at the girl in the light streaming from the general store, "yuh're takin' the longest chance—"

She put fingers on his lips—and he seized the opportunity to kiss them. "A long chance, perhaps, but I'm willing, oh, very willing," she said bending toward him. "Where you will go, I will go, and have no doubt that you will find honorable employment. Something will turn up—it always does for the man who tries hard, who won't give up. And now, be happy for tonight—it's our wedding night, Tom." She laughed softly. "I won't *look* much like a bride, but after I've washed my face and fixed my hair, which I can do at the preacher's, I'll feel like one!"

Hallock took the hand he had kissed in both his own. He could only squeeze it, speechless. His wonder of woman had so multiplied that his mind was awlirl; he felt himself groping helplessly, yet joyously. "Ready, girl, to pick that ring?" he asked.

"I'll corral these nags an' meet yuh over to the preacher's folks," called Rafe Seddon, as Sue gave herself into Hallock's arms, and hoof-clatter followed his words.

Mr. and Mrs. Tom Hallock rode side by side into Derringer next morning. They had spent the night, by kind invitation, at the parsonage, and the saloonkeeper and Seddon had put up at the hotel. Sam had elected to accompany the driver back to the broken-down stage, lending Hallock his saddle-horse. The couple had started at dawn and taken the long trail around the Cuddy Paw Mountains and although it was after ten o'clock when they turned into Main street, the town that was run by bad men was just awakening. Al Deering and his clerk were carrying out goods for display on the store stoop when they heard hoofbeats. Recognizing the riders, Deering let go an armful, and flat-footed out in the street to meet them. His joy at learning of the death of Chalk Gallatin was only equaled by his delight at seeing Sue Brace alive and radiant, notwithstanding the marks she bore of her recent experience. And when told that they were man and wife, Deering pumped the hand of the gunfighter and expressed a wish to kiss the bride—which the bride did not deny him, leaning from the saddle and presenting a cheek. Then they rode on past Spokane Harry's honkatonk, in the wide doorway of which two dance-hall girls, evidencing in disarrayed hair, ghastly faces and soiled attire the wear and tear of the previous night, stood, arms about each other. They blinked, for the morning sunlight was painful to their eyes, and flapped languid but friendly hands at the newly weds. Hallock had never frequented Spokane Harry's, but he was something of a hero in the eyes of the women who lived on sensationalism; and Sue was even more popular because she treated them as sisters, unfortunate, but sisters just the same.

"You're a pair to draw to," called one, Mame, for they had heard the con-

versation with the storekeeper. "Chalk was a damned nuisance. Luck, you love-birds!"

WHEN they neared the unpainted frame building where Doc Ben-nison lived and had his office on the second floor, over a blacksmith shop, Hallock remarked that his wife had better stop and have her scalp, laid open by Chalk's quirt-handle, properly treated and bandaged. He would ride on, put up the horses, and return for her.

Hallock turned Sam's saddler in at the livery stable, forked Happy Hoofs and laid a course for the Sundown stage-station. He had ridden by the door of the Elkhorn Bar with danger farthest from his thoughts, when a bullet crashed through the saloon window and ricocheted from his saddlehorn. Stung to sudden fury by the treacherous attack, he did not even stop to dismount, but whirling Happy Hoofs, spurred her across the stoop and through the Elkhorn's door, throwing himself forward to escape the frame. As the dancing hoofs rang on the bar-room floor, a second shot thundered, seeming to rock the walls which confined the sound. The malignant, bruised face of Coldiron McClintock peered through the smoke drifting ceilingward. The bullet had carried away the lobe of Hair-Trigger's right ear, the erratic motions of the paint mare, who had never been in a saloon before, saving her rider's life. Hallock had unhitched both guns as he charged in, and from his perch in the saddle, he swung one in line with his enemy. Coldiron, bored through from chest to back by a forty-five slug, tipped forward, firing as he went down.

"Yuh'll be company for Gallatin!" shouted Hallock, and saw other hands digging for iron. It was quite a gathering of his enemies. His work was cut

out for him. Sam's bartender, while he could not be numbered an enemy, could not be counted on for assistance, as the first exchange of shots had driven him to cover under the bar.

Hallock regretted riding into the saloon, realizing his extreme disadvantage in being higher than the heads of his enemies, a bull's eye for even poor marksmanship, which was unknown in that gun-toting town, and he set about at once to rectify the mistake he had made in a flurry of anger. To dismount, facing the foe and shooting simultaneously, was no small feat, rendered more difficult by Happy Hoofs' attack of skittishness. She was ordinarily not gun-shy, but the close quarters, the deafening volume of sound, the acrid, choking smoke, all combined to craze her, and she "wilded up" at the critical moment. Hallock had withdrawn his feet from the stirrups and was drawing up his right leg to clear the pommel when the iron-shod hoofs slipped on the none-too-clean floor—though there were a half dozen brass cuspidors in different parts of the barroom—and the paint mare crashed down on her left side, pegging one leg of her rider to the floor and his back against the bar. The aim of three desperadoes was thereby spoiled and the bullets slammed into the side-wall of the saloon, so close together that they bored one large hole.

Nothing daunted by the mishap, Hallock whanged away from the floor, getting two of the ambitious artillerists in as many seconds. "Get up, girl, get up!" he kept repeating and the paint mare, recovering quickly from the shock of the fall, struggled hard. One black-bearded Patane, thinking to take advantage of Hallock while he was down, stole forward on the balls of his feet for a close shot, the mare's movements in trying to rise being disconcerting. Patane imagined he was unobserved and had but two steps to go

when one of the gunfighter's Colts roared at him over Happy Hoof's shoulder. The dying bad man, as he dropped face first, struck the scrambling Happy Hoofs with his out-thrown hands, which so startled the paint that she jumped, snorting, and heaved upright on her feet. Hallock, mindful of his pet's danger, even in the thick of the fight, denied himself the protection her body might have afforded while he was getting up; slapped her flank with a gun-barrel, which drove the animal outside.

A BULLET splintered the bar close to Hallock's left ear. His left leg was somewhat numb from the weight of the horse, but he planted his right foot firmly and with back braced against the bar, slid to nearly his full height, crouched in characteristic fighting pose. Lew Harney and Sid Cobb cattle thieves, when they were working, ready gun-fanners working or loafing, found themselves in direct line with Hair-Trigger's leveled sixes. Harney already had taken one shot at the two-gun man and missed and Hallock knew it. Both waddies were standing near a poker table. Lew whirled like a flash, upsetting the table and jerking Cobb down as he threw himself behind it. Harney was just a fraction too slow to save himself. A slug whined unerringly from one of Hallock's guns and smashed between the rustler's eyes. Harney lifted to his feet with a short yell, then fell against the barricade he had arrayed, turning the table over on its top, the legs plumb, and exposing Sid Cobb. "Fanning" his triggerless Colt, that is, striking the thumb of his left hand against the hammer, Sid unlimbered but one shot before Hallock tucked a "settler" in his chest and he slid forward, gasping, beside his late partner in cattle raiding.

But four of Hallock's enemies stood, unhurt, avid, in spite of the destruction

he had wrought and, but for his torn ear, his apparently scatheless condition, to compass his defeat. Now or never, kill or be killed; they could never get to the door past Hallock's guns, in fact, none of the four entertained a thought of escape. They had reached a stage of desperation where death can be faced eye to eye without a conscious quiver. Len Roper, a long-haired, sun-smoked old rawhide, who had been a bad man for forty years, advanced first on the bayed Hallock, tipping up his holster to fire through the bottom. He pulled trigger and so did Hallock, the shots roaring into one. Knowing the deadly style of Roper's gunplay, Hallock had aimed to cripple his hand and thus deflect the bullet; otherwise, even with death tearing at his vitals, old Len might have the tenacity to send a bullet straight as his last act on earth. Bellowing his pain and rage, the long-haired bad man—who was no imitation, though he did affect the lengthy locks which were so often an indication of the show-off, a wild-looker who couldn't stand the acid—dangled his smashed paw, then hand that for forty years had cut down good and bad alike according as their politics were at variance with Mr. Roper's. Bang! roared Hallock's right-hand gun in the midst of Len Roper's lamentation, cutting it short. But Len, though old, proved tougher than some of the younger ones who had gone down earlier. With a bullet lodged somewhere near his heart—Hallock was certain of that—the long-hair took several steps backward, trying to steady himself after the shock of the lead injection. His good hand, flung out to aid him in regaining his balance, struck a leg of the table overturned by Messrs. Harney and Cobb. Dying on his feet, his brain seethed with one idea, to retaliate on the man who had broken his gun hand and given him his death wound; and the contact of his hand

with the table-leg seemed to suggest a way. Unable to utter a sound, but with strength to spare for his final deed because hate buoyed him, Len tore the leg loose and flourishing it has a club, staggered at the man crouched back to bar.

HALLOCK'S blazing eyes at that instant were glancing over the sights at the three other desperadoes, advancing on him as one man, with intervals of a few feet between them, to get him from in front and both sides at once. As he threw down on the gun-packer sidling to the left, Len Roper piled in, oblivious to the spurting gun, and took the bullet himself. There was a loud thump. Roper had landed a blow with his club, but not where he aimed for, almost instant death from that second bullet shortening his reach. Instead of striking Hallock on the head, the table-leg smashed him on the chest, yet with sufficient force to hurl him backward, half across the bar. Len Roper slumped floorward, unaware that he had not achieved his end.

Gasping for breath and flat on his back, with legs hanging over the edge of the bar, Hallock heard a sudden rush of feet. His last three enemies were closing in, following up the advantage given them by the late Mr. Roper, over whose body one of them tripped—and cursing, kicked it—in his blind eagerness to finish the battling Mr. Hallock while he was down. Mr. Hallock may have been down, but he was by no means out. He raised up as two of these desperadoes thrust guns within an inch of his body. As he was employing one arm to lever himself upright, the gun in that hand was temporarily, so to speak, spiked cannon. But Mr. Hallock had feet and he did not let them stay idle in this extremity. The man he could not reach with a gun he kicked full in the face—and the face disappeared. Thrusting the other gun into

the vest of the second bad man, Hallock tunnelled him, the flame from the muzzle setting his shirt on fire.

The third man of the trio, who had been delayed in reaching Hallock by stumbling over Len Roper, was the first object to loom on Hallock's wavering vision as he slid off the bar. He had forgotten that man. He fired without aiming; saw him fall and the smoke jerking from his gun-muzzle as he fell. But Hallock was sure he himself had not been hit, for he felt all right, except for dizziness. On the floor a man moved; accustomed to watching the hands of men, their hands and their eyes, Hallock almost mechanically saw the hand of the man lift—and mechanically he shot, wondering as he pressed trigger, if there was an unused cartridge in the gun he pointed. He had lost count of shots and men. The roaring explosion and the thump of the man's head on the floor were both vaguely satisfying. That man must be the last of them thought Hallock as he gazed around, seeming to look from another world upon the shambles he had created with his two hands, lined with iron; yes, he was the last, the fellow he had kicked in the face. He remembered now. He sheathed his guns and turned to the bar.

"Whisky," he said in a monotonous voice, though there was nobody in sight to take his order.

The bartender, his face pasty, crawled out from under. He fumbled the bottle and glass he placed at Hallock's hand.

"Nerves ain't so good, huh?" the gunfighter sneered. "Look here!" He stretched forth his right arm, the fingers of his hand spread wide—steady as rock.

The bartender nodded, shamefaced. "I ain't put together that way. Few is." He sniffed. "Somethin' burnin'."

"Powder," suggested Hallock, sarcas-

tically.

"Somethin' else, too." The bartender leaned over the mahogany. "There!" he exclaimed and pointed down. "Westy's shirt's afire. Gettin' cremated."

Hallock glanced at the little blaze started by the pistol he had shoved in Westy's vest and whipping off his sombrero, beat it out. Then he poured and downed a short whisky.

"Why'n hell didn't yuh warn me about Coldrion layin' for me in here?" Hallock demanded. "Friend o' his, was yuh?"

"Hadn't no idea he was up to nothin', Trigger," replied the barman. "I don't think he was till he saw yuh ridin' by. Spoke about yuh mashin' his face an' said he'd get yuh for it—but that was nothin' new. That crowd yuh just cleaned up always did have it in for yuh. My God, but yuh can fight!"

"Thanks, I *am* able to take care o' myself *some*. It's plumb lucky I didn't need no help. About all I can thank yuh for, yuh bar-swabber, is keepin' out of it."

The "bar-swabber" was silent. Hallock turned to go; paused at the door and looked back. "There's one face in 'ticular I'm missin' on that floor—Blackfoot Dixon's. Know where he's at?"

"Ain't seen him since last night."

Hallock strode out of the front door—into the arms of his wife.

CHAPTER IX

HALLOCK KICKS

"I'VE been fightin' ag'in," declared the two-gun man idiotically, holding Sue in close embrace.

Behind her stood Doc Bennison, sober again, but shabby as ever. His smile was expansive. "When I gave you

permission to fight, Hallock, I stipulated one man at a time, and here you took on half the town. Not to mention," he added, "the other capers your wife has told me about."

"That so, doc, yuh did give me orders," Hallock loosened the hold of one arm about Sue and scratched his head, half-grinning. 'Danged if I didn't forget 'em. But," with a full-throated laugh, "I *feel* all right."

"In that case," said the doctor, "I'd say we have no cause to worry. But how about that ear?"

Hallock put up a quick hand to the mutilated member. 'By golly, I *do* remember gettin' hit, but it was so long ago, I'd plumb forgot. Coldiron did that—but Coldiron ain't no more an' I'll hear just as good."

"Come over to my office right away and I'll fix it up."

"Soon's I corral my Happy Hoofs, doc. Say, girl," to Sue, lifting her face, which all this while had been buried in his shirt, "yuh don't say nothin'. How come? Yuh can't exactly blame me for that fight. Coldiron fired at me through the front winder an' I went in after him—an' was jumped."

"How many, Hallock?" interposed Bennison.

"Well, doc, I just lost count, they kept comin' so fast, but both guns is empty an' I didn't sling much idle lead," replied the two-gun man. Then, to his wife, "Sue, they was honin' to down me an' I shore thought they would—"

She stopped his mouth with her hand. "Why do you talk so foolishly, Tom! Blame you! I never was so sca—"

"Hallock," cut in the doctor again, "I didn't think Sue Bra— Hallock could faint, but she can. Did, dead away, when we ran down here to see what the cannonading meant. I differed in opinion with your wife. I was that confident you'd win through—well, I said to myself if you didn't smoke your way

out I'd never touch another drop of liquor. And that was a promise."

Doc, yuh shore must've had confidence," Hallock remarked quizzically.

"I don't suppose," said Bennison, "that anybody needs my attention in there." And he waved toward the bar-room.

"No!" Hallock shook his head. Then added: "'Nless it's the barkeep. Yuh might prescribe him a nerve-tonic."

That fight in the Elkhorn Bar was a source of conversation in Derringer years after; hard-eyed old-timers, who had survived the hectic days of the town, related Hair-Trigger Hallock's feat with pride and heartily cursed the law that only allowed shooting by man who wore badges. There had been no gunplay paralleling that of Hallock's since Wild Bill Hickok, armed with a rifle, two six-shooters and two bowie knives, shot and cut up the dreaded McCandlas outfit, single-handed, in Kansas. Hallock did not realize that he had made history for Montana, but he did not know he had stirred up Derringer considerably, particularly when, on entering Spokane Harry's honkatonk that night, he was approached by the frock-coated, cat-footed proprietor.

"Evening, Trigger," he said. "We don't often have a visit from you, and while I want to make you welcome, I hope, at the same time, you're not looking for anyone. I'm not a cheap skate, but the fixtures in this place cost me plenty and if any such gunplay as you staged in the Elkhorn was pulled in here—I'd burst into tears." Spokane's poker face relaxed in as much of a smile as he ever permitted himself. "You sure messed up the Elkhorn, you and your playful friends. Promise me, Trigger, if you're aimin' to start something you'll drag it out in the street first."

HALLOCK rolled a smoke, licking the flap and striking a match before replying. "I can't promise, Spokane, because I'm gettin' the bad habit o' keepin' my word. I know I didn't clean up *all* the hard guys who'd like to get me an' most of 'em hang up in here. But I ain't huntin' trouble, except with one: Blackfoot Dixon, Galatin's sidekicker. He'll try to play hunk for Chalk's toe-up from ambush. An' I'd just as leave see him first."

"I would myself," said Spokane Harry, dryly. "But, Trigger, he hasn't been in here tonight." And Spokane lied. Not that he had any regard for the hide of the quarterbreed, but he feared that a meeting between the two would mean a repetition of the Elkhorn Bar shoot-up; there were several able gunmen present, he knew, who only needed someone to take the initiative and they would jump Hallock. Added to the grudge they already toted against him, he had gunned friends of theirs that day.

Hallock, though he had no cause to doubt the honkatonk owner's word—and did not—elected to circulate in Spokane's joint "for a spell," as he put it. Blackfoot Dixon was likely to amble in. Hallock had been on the lookout for him all day—but not a sign.

Nodding to the many who spoke to him, but avoiding conversation with anybody, Hallock was spectator in turn at the roulette wheel and the faro layout and in this way passed a half hour. He took no notice of the venomous stares of certain Colt-bristling gentlemen in the big hall, though careful not to place his back toward them. He decided suddenly that one of the gallery boxes fronting the small stake would be an ideal lookout, safe from rear attack and obtaining a view of every corner of the hall as well as the stage. Going upstairs, Hallock entered the first box he came to, closed the door behind

him, and pulling the curtains apart, sat down at the table. A waiter thrust his head in at the door and Hallock ordered beer, then turned his gaze on the crowded floor beneath. To the comedian in the limelight at that moment and convulsing most of the crowd with his jokes and antics, the gunfighter paid no attention. His eyes, lifting from the vivid scene of noise and movement and color below, ranged along the boxes on the gallery opposite—and stopped at the third one. The curtains were pulled back; a man, his back toward Hallock, and a familiar figure, crouched against the thin wall separating his box from the next one, which had its curtains drawn together, in an attitude of listening.

"Blackfoot!" Hallock swore, and clenched his fist. "Then Spokane lied, for Dixon didn't come in *after* me. I was watchin' too close to miss him."

At the same time he thought it strange that the quarter-breed should have missed seeing him while he was circulating in the crowd on the floor. The explanation, as it seemed to him, must be that Dixon had other business on hand, and so engrossing as to dwarf the importance of a meeting with Hallock, likely to be a life-and-death matter. It would have been of interest to the gunfighter to learn the nature of that other business even if he had none of his own to transact with Mr. Dixon. When the waiter returned with the bottled beer and glass, the door of Hallock's box stood open and he was gone.

HALLOCK was not many minutes making his way across the thronged hall, up the stairs and along the narrow gallery to the box in which he had seen Blackfoot Dixon. The door was ajar. Plucking a gun from his belt and with his thumb slipped under the hammer, he was about to jerk the door wide when a commotion started in

the adjoining box. Scuffling, bumping, panting of hard-drawn breaths and low, guttural curses these last in Blackfoot Dixon's voice, not a doubt of it. Hallock strode forward and tried the door of the box from which the sounds of strife emanated. It was locked. He was going to call, but on second thought closed his lips, jammed the muzzle of his Colt against the lock and pulled trigger once, twice. The fastening was smashed, the door swung inward an inch or two without Hallock touching a finger to it. The gunfighter was about to enter, pushing his gun ahead of him and puzzled as to what it all meant, when the door was jerked wide open and a heavy body catapulted into him, knocking him down. The man ran on down the gallery and Hallock, recognizing the figure as Blackfoot Dixon's as he scrambled up, reached hurriedly for the six-shooter he had dropped.

"Leave it lay, pardner," drawled a man's voice near at hand and Hallock looked for the first time into the box, lighted by an oil lamp. The owner of the voice was a tall, lanky but broad-shouldered young fellow with curly hair and a not unhandsome, good-natured face. He wore semi-range garb and was training a sawed-off thirty-eight in Hallock's direction, a lazy but dauntless blue eye back of the sight. Against the wall near the young man stood a dance-hall girl known as Goldie, her dark eyes mirroring fright, one white hand at her laboring breast.

"Boy," growled Hallock, as he rose, flourishing his Colt in utter and contemptuous disregard of the young man's order, "I dunno who'n hell yuh are, but yuh're a damn fool for one thing. If that li'l pop-gun o' yuhrs should go off an' hit me anywheres I'd be real mad."

And he wheeled and plunged along the gallery in pursuit of Blackfoot Dixon. The breed bad man was still in sight for the gallery was long and

Hallock had been detained but a minute or two, long enough to pick himself and his Colt up and bare fangs at the timorous young man. Hallock had never yet shot a man in the back, so he held fire as he ran after his quarry. Blackfoot threw a backward glance as he heard the thud and jingle of Hallock's feet above the noise was making himself. Hallock wondered why he didn't shoot back—then reasoned that the breed must have lost his gun in the struggle with the curly-headed youngster. What haven Blackfoot originally had in mind, unless he meant to risk his neck by dropping from one of the unoccupied boxes to the floor below, the gunfighter could not guess, for the stairway was in the other direction. Dixon seemed to be running into a "blind gulch." At the end of the gallery was a window, overlooking Main street, and the drop was considerable. Reaching the window, which was open, the breed desperado slung a leg across the sill and turned a snarl-twisted face toward the man rushing down the gallery, running awkwardly on account of his high heels. To Blackfoot Dixon it looked as if he was bayed.

Hallock shouted: "Gotcha, Injun!"

FROM the street below came the thumping beat of galloping hoofs, the unmistakable rattle, bang and creak of the stage—Rafe Seddon, accompanied by Sam Brace, was just getting in from his long drive around the Cuddy Paws. Blackfoot Dixon turned his face from Hallock and looked down into the street. In a flash, grasping the window-frame to steady himself, he drew up both legs, crouching on the sill. Hallock was almost near enough to put out a hand and touch him when Blackfoot launched his slim body into the air in a pantherish leap. Hallock felt like a man left holding the proverbial sack. He had been unprepared for the ma-

neuver. Not at first connecting the breed's desperate jump with the noise of the stagecoach, subconsciously heard above the roar of the dance-hall activities, Hallock was treated to a surprise when he looked out. Instead of lying below with a snapped neck or leg, Blackfoot Dixon was riding away on the coach roof, all asprawl just as he had landed. He gathered himself together, even as Hallock glimpsed him, to meet the attack of Sam Brace, who had risen on the seat beside Seddon and was facing backward. The driver, roaring at his four-in-hand and sawing on the lines, brought the Concord to a standstill at an acute angle, with the leaders prancing on the board sidewalk. Dixon and the saloonkeeper locked instantly in a mutual grizzly hug and lurched wildly back and forth, preventing Hallock from attempting a snap-shot.

"Hold 'im, Sam! Lend a hand there, Rafe!" yelled Hallock from the window, then drew in his head and retraced his steps at speed over the gallery. He passed the box in which he had encountered the reckless youth with the short-barreled thirty-eight. The man and Goldie were still there, he noticed—Goldie was cursing the fellow. He wheeled as he heard Hallock going by, called something which the gunfighter did not catch, nor stop to have repeated. Hallock leaped down the stairway, swinging his gun, and the men and women nearest him scattered. They had heard nothing of the set-to on the gallery as they were making more noise than had attended that fracas themselves, and they thought Hallock was on the rampage and anybody likely to stop lead. He did not have to clear a path to the front door, it was cleared for him by willing enough feet. He passed close to Spokane Harry, whose inward trepidation did not show in his expressionless face.

"You lied to me, Spokane!" rasped Hallock, grabbing the honkatonk owner's arm and halting an instant. "I 'spose yuh thought Blackfoot would get me from behind, me believin' what yuh—"

"I lied to keep the joint from being messed up," interrupted Spokane, boldly fronting the gunfighter though he feared death. "I knew Dixon was here and I tried to find him and persuade him to get out. Where is he?"

"Jumped out the front window onto the stage," replied Hallock, failing to mention the queer game he had bucked on the gallery. He was forced to believe the proprietor's alleged reason for concealing the fact of Dixon's presence and released him, saying, "No fight with yuh, then," and ran on. As he charged out of the front door. Spokane sighed in relief and with the other hand brushed the arm Hallock had roughly gripped.

RUNNING toward the stage, halted down the street not far from the honkatonk, Hallock was greeted by a shout from Sam Brace, who was sitting on the coach roof: "He got away, Trigger!"

Hallock swore luridly. "Which way?"

"I don't rightly know," answered the saloonkeeper, in the tone of one who feels his failure deeply. "Twisted my gun away from me, hit me between the eyes an' dropped off. An' Rafe, he had his hands full with the hosses. Too bad, Trigger. I did my best, but he was a combination o' steel spring an' breased hog."

"I reckon. Got away from me, so I can't hardly say much to yuh for lettin' him repeat. Wouldn't be sense to look for him up any dark alleys—he's got yuhr gun, ain't he?" The two-gun man was standing by the stage now, looking up at the saloonkeeper, and saw him

nod.

"If these four-legged thunderbolts—" Rafe Seddon, who had the four-in-hand well under control after a stiff fight, began to apologize.

"Never mind, Rafe," said Hallock, "I'll cut his trail ag'in—soon enough, likely. He was so doggone nervy about it, I'm a'most willin' to say he deserved to get away. How's yuhr wheel, Rafe? Runnin' on all four, huh? Sam, I had a dinger of a fight in yuhr place today. The old barroom is cleaned up pretty fair now, but it'll wear some o' the scars long as it stands. Stay up there an' let Rafe put yuh down at the door," as Brace, mightily intrigued by the news, although still groggy from the blow delivered by the barrel of his own six-shooter, crawled jerkily back to the driver's box, intending to alight. He hank down again at Hallock's words and said:

"I reckon yuh're right, Trigger. Legs wouldn't carry me this minute. See yuh at the Bar."

"Want a lift, Trigger?" invited Seddon. "More room than yuh can use."

"Thanks, I'll walk." Hallock glanced at the crowd down in front of Spokane Harry's; at the groups in the street, who had witnessed Blackfoot Dixon's spectacular leap from the second floor of the dance hall. The people began to disperse and go about their own business as Seddon, with a mighty yank, got the leaders off the boardwalk and started in the right direction.

Hallock left the street and jingled along the sidewalk toward the Elkhorn Bar. His wire would be anxiously waiting; it was a new and thrilling and altogether satisfying experience to have a woman waiting for a fellow, with arm lips and soft arms and—real love; then he thought, with a sharp pain of regret, of the pal who had died under his hand. "Pore old Reckless," he muttered, "he shore would've been right in the thick

o' things that's been happening', whangin' away with both hands. He shore loved to fight, the red-headed cuss!" He had visited the lone grave behind the shack he and Brule had occupied for the first time that day and erected a rule headboard, talking to the man under the sod as he worked.

Engrossed in his thoughts, Hallock was nearing the Elkhorn when on his right a figure grew suddenly out of the darkness, stepping around the corner of the barber shop. The light in the shop window reached just far enough to dimly reveal the dark, Indian features of Blackfoot Dixon and strike a dull plint from the long six-shooter with which he was covering the gunfighter.

"Now, Hallock, yuh die!" snarled the breed.

"By Sam's gun, too. Ain't that hell!" Hallock, though taken by surprise, had his nerves well in hand. His eyes narrowed. Dixon had a dead drop.

"Yuh killed Chalk, they been tellin' me," continued Blackfoot, "an' other pals o'mine—old Len an' Coldiron an' Lew Harney an' them. I wasn't in town or yuh'd been fightin' me, too. Glad I'm livin' to get revenge for 'em. Hallock, I hate yuhr guts! If things had broke different, if I had the time, I'd roast yuh, Blackfoot style. But I gotta be satisfied killin' yuh ordinary. Hands to the buzzards! An' watch the li'l hammer rise, watch 'er close, for when she falls, yuh do. I said hands up!" he repeated tensely. "Yuh're too slick to be trusted with 'em down!"

HALLOCK had been steeling himself for a supreme effort. He was thankful for that light at his back, dim as it was. Dixon stood within reach of hand or foot, holding Brace's gun low, nearly on a line with his hip. As if in obedience to Dixon's rasping command, Hallock's hands shot skyward and with the motion of lifting them, he

kicked upward with his right foot. The toe of his boot struck sharply the wrist of the desperado, who was scarcely expecting any movement from the region below Hallock's belts, and knocked the gun out of his hand. Dixon loosed a white man's oath. Hallock's hands dropped like a flash, his right one to the belt sagging on the side and coming up with a gleam of steel.

"Yuhr turn to watch the hammer Blackfoot!" the two-gun man hissed.

Dixon did not cringe, his beady eyes did not waver as he looked at the slow-lifting hammer. "Go ahead an' shoot an' be damned, Hallock!" he said coolly. "I'm mostly white, but there's enough Blackfoot in me to make me take medicine like an Indian."

Hallock swiftly sheathed his Colt, stooped and recovered Sam's iron, which had fallen near his feet, and addressed the astonished breed: "Dixon, yuh may hate my guts, as yuh say, but I'm admirin' yuhrs. Yuh shore ain't afraid, an' how yuh come to pal around with a yellow pup like Chalk Gallatin gets me plumb; but that's nothin' to do with us. Blackfoot, it's in the cards that I'm to kill yuh—sometime—but not now. Can't do it after the way yuh just looked into that muzzle an' not an eye flickerin'. We'll have to meet ag'in an' finish it, an' likely I'm a fool for takin' a chance on another time, for yuh, bein' Injun enough to die without whinin', are also Injun enough to think ambushin' fair fightin'. Now, get the hell out!"

The hatred had not died out of Blackfoot's eye, for all that his enemy had spared him, as he turned and swiftly retreated up the alley in which he had waited for Hallock to pass.

The gunfighter proceeded on his way to the Elkhorn, shaking his head. He knew he was a fool for giving Dixon another opportunity to get him, but, lion-hearted himself, he could not break

the temporary spell of admiration for similar courage displayed, under test, by the other. Had Chalk Gallatin's backbone stiffened at the time Hallock faced him on the slope, the bad cowboy's death might have been less violent—*might* have been, for Chalk had committed the unpardonable sin, to the primitive mind, especially the elemental primitive mind of a man like Hallock, of manhandling a woman, the woman he loved.

"I'll tell Sue about that Dixon starin' down death an' paralyzin' my trigger-finger for the first time," he reflected; "an' I won't tell nobody else."

He was but a few steps from the door of Sam Brace's saloon when he heard his name called: "Hallock—wait!"

The voice was somehow familiar. He swung on his heel and saw a man running toward him. Not until the man came up where the light from the open door of the Elkhorn struck upon face and figure did Hallock recognize him—and then he did so with a start. He had completely forgotten the young fellow in the gallery-box at Spokane Harry's with Goldie, the curly-headed youngster who had had the presumption to point a sawed-off thirty-eight at Hallock. Here he was, smiling brazenly.

CHAPTER X

HALLOCK OPENS A DOOR

"Y UH don't look a heap glad to see me, Mr. Hallock," declared the young fellow with a Western drawl and in no tenderfoot tone, as might have been expected.

"Yuh want to be careful how yuh go round pointin' guns at folks," replied Hallock, not knowing whether to be angry or otherwise. "Some of 'em might not take it as a joke like I did."

Studying the youth in a calmer mood, especially the eyes and the firm chin, the gunfighter decided there might be more iron in his system than appeared at first glance.

"I wasn't meaning' that as a joke, Hallock," stated the young fellow boldly. "I made a mistake, that was all, thought yuh were a friend o' Dixon's, but the girl, Goldie, told me different, an' I called to yuh as yuh ran by the box that second time, but yuh seemed in a hurry. Did yuh catch him?"

"Who—Blackfoot? He's still foot-loose. Now, brother, before we swap any more talk, I'll just break a rule o' frontier etiket an' ask yuh who an' what?"

A deputy sheriff's badge, pinned inside the youngster's vest, gleamed in Hallock's eyes. "An' my label's Billy Edgelow, sent up here by Sheriff Granger to look—Stop!" he exclaimed sharply, lifting a palm in the oldtime peace sign of the plains, to halt the downward sweep of Hallock's hands. "I know who yuh are, Hair-Trigger, know yuhr record, but I ain't after yuh!"

Hallock's suddenly tense body relaxed again. He even smiled a little. "Yuhr rep as a gun-slinger ain't unknown to me either, Edgelow, but I hadn't no idea yuh was so young. My hat's off to yuh, boy, yuh've made a lot o' cagey ones lay down. An' I notice now yuh're packin' a reg'lar forty-five in a reg'lar belt; where's the li'l thirty-eight?"

"Inside my vest, the place it always is when it ain't workin'. Havin' that short barreled baby tonight just about saved my skin. From what I've heard of yuhr recent doin's, Hallock, since I hit town, includin' the fact yuh've married," and he smiled engagingly, "I reckon yuh've been workin' in the interest o' law an' order, even if it was

personal scores yuh were settlin'. F'r instance, yuh finished the job, the main job, that brought me here. In my pocket I got a useless warrant for Mr. Chalk Gallatin."

"The hell yuh have!" Hallock exploded. "I mean," he corrected himself grimly, "he's in hell now an' yuhr warrant shore *is* useless; couldn't serve no paper *there*! Was it 'cause he ventilated the last town marshal Derringer had that the law wanted him?" inquired Hallock.

"For one thing, yeh," nodded Deputy Edgelow, "but mainly for holdups on the Sun Canyon trail. Yuh remember several passengers were gunned in those holdups?"

"Heard so. I never figgered Chalk was that lone bandit. The stick-ups stopped about six months ago, didn't they? Uh-huh. Well, that's about the time Chalk drifted in here. How come yuh didn't nail him before, then?" questioned Hallock.

"Lost track of him. Several weeks ago Seth Rawdon came up here to look over the Two Bar Ranch. When he returned to the county-seat he reported to the sheriff that he'd seen Chalk in a saloon in this town; he'd been a victim in one o' Chalk's holdups to the tune of a thousand dollars. Met yuh the same day in the same place, recognizing yuh from descriptions he'd heard; said yuh could do sleight-o'-hand with a gun."

"I remember him," Hallock nodded slowly. "Didn't know who he was an' got suspicious he might be a deputy. Found he wasn't carryin' a gun an' when I told him it was tough country out to the Two Bar an' he'd best get heeled, he gimme a li'l sermon on livin' by the trigger. Yuh bet, I remember him—he was pretty near right. Name's Rawdon, eh? Came here to ask where he could hire a hoss. Did he buy the Two Bar?"

"YEH, last week. He's there now, an' that Dixon lifted—but I'll go on from the time Rawdon visited Granger, tellin' Chalk's whereabouts an' how tough Derringer was. Sheriff knew about the toughness an' had meant for sometime to put the lid on up here. As well as gun-totin' hombres makin' this town their headquarters an' an honest man hardly safe in it, cow rustlers an' hoss thieves was raisin' hell for the ranchers, 'specially the Two Bar, which was the reason the former owner was anxious to sell. I was away in another part o' the county when Rawdon called, but as soon as I came back, sheriff started me on the trail ag'in. I got here yesterday; stopped at the Two Bar to see if Rawdon had got hold of any more information that would help me. He hadn't, but he was in a terrible stew an' his punchers, too. Every last hoof had been rustled from the saddle-stock corral. They hadn't any hosses to follow a trail even if they could find one—which they couldn't. Trail was pretty well covered, an' when I tell yuh that Blackfoot Dixon was one o' the hoss thieves, yuh'll understand why—he used his Injun tricks. Well, I hunted round an' hunted round, an' I struck it. Good bit luck, although I've had a lotta experience trailin' an' learned more from the sheriff. He's a wonder. The trail led toward Derringer, an' as I was comin' here anyways, it suited me fine. Sighted the stolen hosses soon, an' the thieves, two of 'em. Was careful not to let 'em see me, though. They took the hosses to a coulee about a mile south o' this town, a place where two men could stand off twenty easy, 'count o' the boulders around it. I didn't tackle it. One o' the thieves, when I got near enough, I recognized as Blackfoot Dixon. Mebbe yuh don't know it, but Blackfoot's wanted about as bad as Chalk was—year ago or more he

roasted two placer miners at the stake an' stole their dust, on Cougar Creek."

"That so! Well, he expressed a heap o' sorrow he wasn't in no position to give me a similar treat. Tickles the Injun spots in him, roastin'." Hallock thought, with a twinge of the manner of Gallatin's deceasement and shut up abruptly.

The deputy picked up the narrative. "While I was watchin' the coulee from a distance, Blackfoot rode off, leavin' his hoss stealin' pardner with the broncs. He headed for Derringer an' I trailed after. It was gettin' dark. When we got here I saw him dodge into that honkytonk. Trained in, but couldn't see nothin' of 'im. So I hung around, waitin' for him to show up. He must've spotted me while I was waitin'; shore he didn't see me when I was trackin' him from the coulee. As my badge was hid like it is now an' I hadn't no idea Blackfoot nor anybody in there knew me by sight, never havin' been up this way before, I wasn't none cautious about paradin'. Dance-hall girl, the one yuh saw me with, come up an' asked me to buy her a drink. Not suspectin' there was any plot afoot an' not wantin' to make any more enemies than necessary, I treated. Then she suggested that we take a box an' watch the show an' have more drinks. Well, she was kinda goodlookin', but I don't care much for her kind an' I wasn't on no pleasure trip, but it struck me that she'd know about Gallatin an' likely could gimme a lotta useful information—if she would. I'd try her. I did. I didn't drink much, though she coaxed me, makin' me some suspicious; an' she didn't drink much, which made me more suspicious. Couldn't guess her game, though, for she answered all my casual-like questions in a way I couldn't disbelieve. Told me yuh'd killed Chalk after he'd run off with the girl yuh're now married to an' about yuh downin'

eight-ten hard ones in the Elkhorn by yuhr lonesome. She didn't know where Blackfoot was, she said, when I asked—an' *that's* where she lied. I know now he was listenin' in the next box, waitin' for her signal."

"I was lookin' for him same time yuh was, Edgelow, an' saw him with his ears to the wall from a box across the hall. I went right over."

"**K**NOW what that girl Goldie's game was? Seein' I wasn't goin' to get drunk, she pulled the curtains shut an' come an' set on my knees an' started to get mushy. I'm—well, I'm human an' I ain't an old man an' she was pretty an' soft, like I say—soft on top, she was, but hard underneath. That skirt, while I was kissin' her, both arms around her, slid one hand down an' lifted my Colt. I felt it leavin' the holster, tried to grab her arm, but she jumps up an' backward, holdin' it an' calls, 'Blackfoot!', sharp. In he jumps, gun in his fist, lockin' the door quick. I made a dive for him as he turned from turnin' the key. We clinched in a mighty lovin' clinch an' I tore the gun away from him, throwin' it under the table. Goldie, I'll say that for her, didn't try to help him in the fight an' she could've easy. Mebbe she was sorry she'd helped a breed ag'in her own race, I dunno. Well, we rassled all over that li'l box, yuh betche, an' I was aimin' to get at that reserve thirty-eight inside my vest. The breed, from bein' pressed so close to me had felt it, knew what I was tryin' to do an' tried to prevent it. Just about then yuh blowed the lock off the door. Dixon mebbe thought it was a good chance to escape or that somebody was gettin' in to help me—I figgered it was somebody comin' to help him; anyways he jerked himself loose as yuh smashed the lock an' stam-peded right over yuh, as yuh know even better than I do. Got my thirty-eight

out, but he was gone before I could fire. Then I lined yuh—an' yuh walked off I reckon yuh're wiser now than yuh was before, eh, Hallock?"

"Keno. How come yuh stayed in the box when I ran after Blackfoot?"

"Why, Goldie told me who yuh was—an' she'd told me before that, in speakin' o' Gallatin, that yuh an' Dixon was deadly enemies; so I figured if anybody could corral Blackfoot, yuh could. An' then I had a few gentle words to pour in the lady's ear appertainin' to her part in the game to colddeck me. When I told her she was liable to arrest did she wilt? Like hell! She called me some names I ain't never heard before an' I thought I'd been dry behind the ears long enough to know 'em all. 'Course I didn't intend to arrest her—I pity the pore devils—but I reckoned to throw a scare into her an' keep her from tryin' the game on somebody else. But she didn't scare an inch. Sorry Blackfoot got away," he added. "When I went down to the street I heard some talk about him tryin' to slope on the stage. I looked for yuh, knowin' yuh'd know more about it than anybody an' final I saw yuh walkin' along here."

Hallock nodded. "The Injun's a devil-darin' cuss. Jumped out the window o' Spokane's place onto the roof o' the stage as it was passin' by. My father-in-law tried to hold him, but couldn't an' he beat it somewheres." The gunfighter did not speak of the second meeting with Blackfoot. He stood thoughtfully a moment or two, the deputy imitating him. "Blackfoot's hoss gone from the hitchrack in front o' Spokane's? That bein' so, mebbe he's rode out to join his pardner in that coulee. I know where it is an' what it's like—as yuh say, a pretty good fort. But they won't be stayin' there long, I reckon, though, before yuh come, there wasn't any law hereabouts to bother 'em none. Aimin' to drive 'em up to

the border an' across into Canada, dontcha reckon?"

"Yeh," said Edgelow. "Take a sharp guy to get 'em by the Mounties, but Blackfoot's sharp enough even if the other fellow ain't."

"Yuh want I should ride with yuh, Edgelow, an' help get the Two Bar hosses back? If there's a way to do it, we'll find the way."

The efficient deputy clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Hallock, I've been hopin' yuh'd offer yuhr help. Ready to go?"

HALLOCK glanced toward the open saloon door. "Yeh," he said suddenly. "I'll see my wife after we come back. Know where the Sundown stage station is? Yuh must've rode past—Righto? Meet yuh at the corrals. My hoss is there."

Ten minutes later they were riding south on the moonlit plain. Deputy Sheriff Edgelow had been talking ever since they threw the town behind.

". . . An' the reward money for Chalk, dead or alive is yuh's, o' course. One thousand offered by the county; another thousand by Wells Fargo. I'll have the sheriff send yuh a check soon's I get back."

"Well," said Hallock, "I ain't yet reached the stage where I'll turn down cold cash; in fact, I'm needin' it more now than I ever did."

"Shore yuh are, though I can't say from experience, not bein' hitched. An' that's all the more reason, Hallock, why you should consider serious that proposition to swear yuh in as a deputy o' Granger's. He *wants* yuh, man. Said he didn't believe yuh was half as black as painted—"

"I was though," interrupted the two-gun man, severely honest, "till the girl who's my wife took me in hand. Pretty wild yes, Edgelow, but she's goin' to gentle me to the bridle in time. Yuh

see, I don't like the deputy idea 'cause it'll mean I've got to keep on packin' guns—an' since I killed a pal by mistake—" He paused and coughed to relieve the sudden tightness in his throat at the recollection of old Reckless lying in his grave.

"I know about that. Goldie told me." The deputy's tone was sympathetic.

"Goldie," said Hallock, in a minute or two, "shore must've poured her brains out of her mouth. Well then, yuh know my reasons for wantin' to discard guns: I'm married an—the other thing."

"Yeh," nodded the deputy, yet was undeterred. "But, Hallock yuhr reputation is big enough for yuh to rest on it. Blackfoot Dixon, I reckon, is about the last of yuhr real haters an' we'll mebbe get him tonight. It ain't likely that many will want a run-in with yuh, knowin' what mean lead yuh serve. Why, Hallock, I'd be willin' to bet anything almost that yuh won't have to pull a gun half a dozen times while yuh're in office. The bad men, rustlers an' all of 'em will take a sneak out o' yuhr part o' Missoula County—it wouldn't surprise me. An' if yuh do have to shoot, why, it'll be in the name o' the law.

"Wearin a nickel badge an' killin' a man don't make no difference in the fact that yuh've killed him," observed Hallock with a logic that stunned but did not convince the younger man. "Not that I'm gettin' ree-ligious," added the gunfighter with a short laugh, "though I've lately scrambled acquaintance with a preacher who rings the bell."

"Yuh ain't got any other job in mind, have yuh?" young Edgelow asked, feeling that here was a clincher.

"No," said Hallock, "an' it's that fact only that keeps me from turnin' yuhr deputy sheriffin' offer down flat. But all I know is how to play opry on

Colonel Colt's harp-distributers; an' I got a wife to support. I'll se what she says, Edgelow, an' of it's 'Yes,' yuh can pin yuhr shiny badge on—"

The thutting crack of a .30-30 finished for him. The bullet plunked in the hard ground in front of them. Ahead lay the rockgrit coulee. At once Hallock swung down and backed Happy Hoofs well out of range, leaving her standing with the reins hanging.

"That's about as far as that Winchester'll throw 'em—where the bullet hit," remarked Hallock, expertly judging the distance to the coulee, "but bring yuhr hoss here alongside mine an' he'll shore be safe."

"Hoss thief's got the edge on us," grumbled the deputy as he followed Hallock's advice. "I never thought to bring a rifle."

"Nor me," said Hallock, "but even if we had one I don't reckon it'd be much good. Feller's forted fine an' he won't expose enough o' himself for us to nick—not in this moon light. Daylight, mebbe. Wonder if it's Blackfoot—though I never seen him handle anything but six-shooters—or the unknown guy by his lonesome. Seein' two ridin' toward him he knew, even as far as we are from his fort, that we wasn't friends. If either one of us, now—but mebbe Blackfoot's joined him a'ready. He's had time enough."

THEY squatted on their heels in silence. The Winchester in the coulee was also silent.

"Say," Hallock exclaimed suddenly, "I think I savvy how to get him! I'll keep him busy in front here—or both of 'em, whichever it is—an' yuh crawl around to the other side o' the coulee an' get 'em in the flank. How are yuh on snake imitatin'?"

"Good at snakin'," replied Deputy Edgelow, without boast. "I'd thought o' rear-attackin' myself, but we've been

seen, they know there's two of us an' if one goes he'll be missed."

"Don't yuh believe it, boy," smiled Hallock, who could not forget Edgelow's youthful appearance, though there was not five year's difference in their ages. "I'll make 'em think we're both here on this spot an' anxious to waste lead. Yuh recollect the old-time scout trick o' shiftin' base with each shot?" And at Edgelow's quick nod he finished, "Well, start crawlin' an' I'll start shootin'."

Hallock stretched himself on his stomach in the bunch-grass, a gun in each fist. He fired with the right-hand weapon, aiming in the direction of the coulee, though for all the damage it would do, he might just as well have fired straight up in the air. The Winchester replied to the roar of the Colt, the lead thumping two or three yards away. Hallock rolled over, rolled several feet, and he did it so quickly that the detonation of the first shot had not died before it was caught up and prolonged by the throbbing boom of a second, belching from the left-hand gun. Meanwhile, belly to the ground, Deputy Billy Edgelow was hitching his long, slim body with painful slowness but steady progress over the sea of bunch-grass, describing a wide semicircle. He could have wished for a moonless night for such work and blessed every cloud which, for a moment or two or longer, swam across the face of the beaming satellite.

The gun fighter stuck to his guns, literally, for over a half hour. He fired and rolled, fired and rolled, left to right and back again, giving as good as imitation of two men shooting from different positions, a few feet apart, as two men could have done. His cartridge belts were getting lighter. He was glad he had two to keep up the bombardment. Young Edgelow was a long time making the trip to the coulee, but, of course

he had to be careful.

"That buckaroo," soliloquized Hallock as time ran on, certain there was but one man coupla lulus slingin' away all this good lead. He ain't so strong on brains himself," he remarked, on second thought, "tryin' to make that rifle carry the few extra yards it won't reach. He's dumber than I am, I reckon, 'cause I don't expect to get nowhere. If that angel-face deputy—"

The distant rumbling of a Colt in the direction whence, heretofore, had sounded only the staccato voice of the Winchester! Then silence. Hallock leaped up, whooping, jammed his smoking guns in their scabbards and ran to the horses. Hair-pinning the paint mare and with the reins of the deputy's mount bunched in his left hand, he scudded across the plain. As he galloped within hail of the coulee, the tall, lanky form of Billy Edgelow appeared in the moonlight running along the rim and waving triumphant arms.

"Got him!" he yelled to Hallock. "One man, but it wasn't Blackfoot. All the Two Bar hosses is down there, twenty-five or thirty of 'em."

MRS. TOM HALLOCK said "yes" in the matter of her husband wearing a deputy sheriff's badge for seventy-five dollar a month; thereby astonishing Billy Edgelow, whose hopes had gone a-glimmering when Hallock left the decision up to his wife. Edgelow thought he knew something about women—and maybe he did, something—but he had never before met the kind of a woman Sue Hallock was. Sue's reason for giving her consent were her own; she knew you couldn't cure a drunkard by cutting off his liquor supply all at once—you had to diminish it gradually. Her husband was in similar case and would require similar treatment! his killing impulse couldn't be uprooted suddenly, but must be

weeded by degrees. The responsibilities of the deputy's office would teach him self-control.

Hallock, having sold the horse and effects of his late partner, Brule, turned up at the Northern Pacific depot one morning, the day after Billy Edgelow departed for the county-seat, and ordered two tickets to Deadwood.

"Ain't leaving us are you, Hallock?" the agent asked, arching his brows. "I thought you were going to be a deputy sheriff around these parts."

"Am," nodded Hallock, smiling. "Don't lose no time gettin' around, news don't. But I'm goin' on my honeymoon first. Be gone about two weeks an' when I come back the sheriff will be up here to swear me in. Ain't seen Deadwood," he added reminiscently, "since I was pretty much of a kid. Got my bad start there, but I've a hankerin' to see the place ag'in, 'specially Jerry Lewis's saloon where I used to serve drinks to Wild Bill Hickok an' Calamity Jane, too."

"Will be interesting," said the agent, who did not seem at all interested in what Hallock was saying, but in some thought of his own. "Say," he spoke abruptly and leaned in the ticket window, close to the gunfighter, "have you been talking around about this trip to Deadwood?"

"Well, I haven't hollered it from any roofs, but it's been no secret. Why?"

"You never found Blackfoot Dixon?"

"No, ain't laid eyes on him since the night he jumped out the honkytonk winder. I suspect he's hidin' close to town an' his friends, what's left of 'em."

"Uh-huh. This may be a good tip or not, Hallock, but Pat Brand—used to be a friend of Len Roper's and none of yours—was here yesterday and bought three sections to Deadwood on the same train you're taking. What do you think of that? Maybe Blackfoot's one of the six."

"Mebbe he is." Hallock's smile did not weaken. "Mebbe it's an exodus, like I heard a preacher say once. The boys don't like the idea o' me deputy sheriffin', knowin' I'll make 'em behave, I reckon. Or mebbe," his lips tightening, "they figger to down me on the train when I ain't lookin'. I'll watch sharp an' thank yuh for tellin' me."

THAT night when Hallock and his bride boarded the eastbound, six undesirable citizens of Derringer got on, too, thinking themselves unobserved. Sam Brace and Cale Halpin, who were at the depot to see the couple off, did not remark then; nor did Sue. But Hallock did, for he was watching and noted that they climbed into the smoker. He smiled grimly; he had kept the agent's information to himself.

"I reckon I'll take a smoke while our bunks is bein' made up, Sue," Hallock remarked, about an hour later, as they were roaring across the bunch-grass plains. Sue suspected nothing, though she had wondered a bit why he wore his guns, as usual, under his coat.

Hallock made his way to the smoker. The instant he entered the car a shot rang out from the other end. It was so unexpected that he could have done nothing, voluntarily, to save himself; but as the gun spouted the train tore round a curve, jerking Hallock off his feet. He went almost to his knees, then straightened, and sweeping back his coat and pulling his guns in two flashing motions, he covered the locality of his half dozen enemies, in seats close together. Blackfoot was the one who had fired. He was kneeling on a seat, facing Hallock, his gun arm resting on the back of it. Striding down the aisle, six-shooters leveled, Hallock called to the other disturbed passengers:

"This ain't a holdup, friends. Just hold yuhr seats an' duck yuhr nuts,

lay plumb low. There's six gents in this car that wants to get off, an' I'm invitin' 'em to step into the aisle and mosey out to the platform before lead starts singin'. Blackfoot, yuh can keep that gun—but not in yuhr hand."

Blackfoot holstered it. Caught under Hallock's drop, the six gunmen stepped into the aisle as directed and filed to the vestibule. Hallock thrust one gun in its scabbard, closed behind them the door into the car, then pushed by Pat Brand and Blackfoot and the rest, and opened the vestibule door.

"One at a time, gents," purred Hallock. "It's take a chance or stand an' take it."

Pat Brand, first in line, sprang out as Hallock's gun prodded him. They heard no sound but the roaring of the train. Blackfoot Dixon, next, cursed the gunfighter savagely—in the white tongue—and hurled himself outward, to be engulfed by the darkness. Another man leaped. A scream floated back to the men on the platform, three waiting apprehensively to follow the man who had cried out, the fourth in merciless mood again, inexorable. As the last man jumped Hallock slammed shut the vestibule door, sheathed his other gun and re-entered the smoker.

"Some passengers just got off," he said, when he stood beside his wife.

"But—we didn't stop at any station." Her eyes widened in surprise.

"They choosed, just the same, to get off," persisted Hallock. "Blackfoot Dixon an' Pat Brand an' friends. Six of 'em."

"Oh!" Comprehension filled her fine eyes; she detected now the dying red flicker in his. She put a hand on his shoulder. "Tom, do you realize this is our honeymoon?"

And Hallock, unable to fathom her expression, wondered if she were reproving him. He unbuckled his gun belts, one after the other.

No Manbreakers Wanted!

By
W. H. B. KENT

Beyond the brimstone border these two hard-bitten badmen could test their deadly gunswift against Ranger John Stark, the human Colt-arsenal from Arizona!



The girl stared, speechless, horrified!

LEAN, dark, hawk-faced John Stark of the Rangers, Arizona Territory, sat on the counter of the Sacatone Trading Company, Sacatone City. He rolled the rowels of his straight shanked spurs up and, down the boards below and reached into the sugar barrel for a lump of brown sugar. The sugar disappeared into a wide, thin-lipped mouth and he cocked a dark

eye at his friend the clerk. "Well, Fat," he asked, "what you been doing?"

The clerk, short, fat and intensely serious answered, "John, I been thinking."

Stark brought up another lump of sugar and told the clerk, "That won't get you nowhere, Fat."

The clerk stopped to look over his glasses, suspiciously. He asked, "What

won't get me nowheres?"

Stark said, "Thinking."

The clerk said, "Hump" in an exasperated voice.

Then Stark said, "Don't tell me they bought cartridges, canteens and canned tomatoes."

The clerk stopped wandering around and looked at the Ranger. He asked, "They? Who?" Then he added, thoughtfully, "There was only one of them."

There was a lightning gleam in the Ranger's eyes. He asked, "Stranger? Slim? Middle height? Light eyebrows?"

The clerk looked surprised and asked, "How'd you know?"

Stark said, "I didn't know. I was just hoping." Then he asked, "You didn't see the horse?"

The clerk answered, regretfully, "No. I didn't John." Then he said, "But he bought two canteens, and enough stuff for two."

Stark nodded to that, "Guess he's what I'm looking for. They robbed the bank in Tucson. Three of them. They shot the cashier. But somebody got one of them as they was getting out of town. I lost them up in the foothills in the dark and thought I'd make a try for here. One of 'em was wounded."

The fat clerk's eyes had opened wide as he asked, "You don't say? And shot the cashier? How much did they get away with?"

Stark said, "I didn't wait to find out." Then he asked, "How long ago and which way did he head?"

Fat told him, "Early this morning and he pulled out for the river." He spoke thoughtfully, "Canteens and tomatoes and there's water between here and the Mexican border." He thrust a fat finger at the Ranger and pronounced, "They're heading for the desert first!"

Stark nodded to that and slid off the

counter. He said, "Get me some tomatoes Fat."

The clerk nodded and walked around behind the counter, muttering, "my, my, and shot the cashier."

The Ranger spoke seriously, "Just the same Fat, some of these ginks you tip off to me are going to get wise someday, and then where'll you be?"

Fat said, "Hump. Me?" in a vindictive voice, reached under the counter and brought out a double barreled sawed off shot gun. He said, "Take a look."

STARK spoke in mock seriousness, "But don't put the butt against your stomach Fat when you let fly both barrels."

The clerk ignored that to suddenly shout, "But my, my, I forgot. Listen John Old Turkey Tracks, that old prospector, and his granddaughter, they left for the desert yesterday! Was going to fill their burro kegs at the river and hit the desert last night."

The Ranger's quizzical eyes sobered. He shook his head, muttering softly, "That cooks it! They're two tough hombres. Bad ones."

He started for the door, throwing over his shoulder, "Adois, Fat. I'll come and tell you about it."

The clerk spoke comfortably, "Sure you will."

John Stark of the Rangers pushed open the screen door and his slitted eyes fought the searing glare of the sun of southern Arizona. A great bay horse at the hitch rail lifted a splendid head to look at him and nickered, softly.

The horse walked along the one dusty street of Sacatone City, tossing his head, rolling the curb wheel over his tongue. Men dragging spurs along the uneven board walk looked at the big bay horse and the hawk-faced Ranger. Some waved, calling out jovially, "Hi

John." Others whispered to each other, "Who the hell's he after now?"

They went past the cool caverns of the livery barn turned to the left and rode up a long slope. Short, grey green live oaks stood around in the short brown grass. Up to the right the tumbled foothills of the Cholla Range rose up to be the gaunt ribs of the Great Peak of the Chollas. Far up blackish juniper bushes ran up into the pinon belt and then the black band of the pines was drawn, like a shawl, around the throat of the ancient, fire tortured peak.

Stark talked to the horse, softly, "This will be four times we chased somebody out into that damn desert. Mebbeso our luck will hold."

A little later he spoke again, "We've known old Turkey Tracks for years but I don't savvy the granddaughter. But mebbeso we did hear about a daughter tucked away somewhere." The big bay flicked his little pointed ears and stepped out briskly.

They came to the crest of the long slope and looked down on the mesquite flats of the Rio Sacatone and over a thin string of green leaved walnuts to the desert. For mile on mile the desert rolled away to the horizon. Red and brown with leperous white patches of alholi. The heat waves shimmered and shifted and the desert seemed to roll and heave like some treacherous, repulsive sea. Away off at the end of the world a blue line lay between desert and sky. "The Faraway Hills," Stark was thinking. "Little water. Only enough for a few head of horses."

The horse went on down the Tuscon road, into the mesquite flats along the river. Every footfall lifted little balls of white dust that hung in the air. They turned off the road into a trail that wound around through the mesquite and catclaw and over to the river.

There was water there, a shallow

stream that sparkled in the sunlight. Across the river Stark slid off the horse and began to hunt signs. He quickly found the place where Turkey Tracks, the old prospector, had stopped for awhile. The mark of the water kegs was plain where they had been filled. "Four burros," he told himself and followed the trail a little way. "Old Turkey Tracks on foot and the girl riding. The old fool, dragging his granddaughter into the desert." Then he grinned and thought, "If she looks like old Turkey Tracks she might as well be in the desert as anywhere."

He came back to the river bank and began casting about for the tracks of two horses. He thought, "I know these horse tracks, followed them far enough to." It was sometime before he found where two horses had come out of the river. His lean dark face lightened with pleasure then darkened in disappointment. They were not the same horses.

He thought, "They could have got fresh horses out of the AN pasture." After a little he shook his head, muttering. "But I've got to be sure."

He found where a man had squatted on his heels by the river, perhaps to fill canteens. He followed that back into the brush. There he found what he wanted.

In the dust, under a mesquite bush, was the clear print of the back of a man. A man had laid there at full length on his back, waiting for the man at the river. What brought the gleam of delight to Stark's eyes was that the man's left hand rear pocket had been half torn down. The mask of the torn pocket was quite clear.

STARK walked briskly back to the big bay. "That's him," he told the horse. "That's the wounded one. I saw that torn pocket in the dirt yesterday afternoon."

Stark slid up unto the horse, rode up out of the brush, through a thicket of ocatilla cactus and the desert was before him. He was thinking, "They haven't water enough to reach the Far-away Hills, neither have I, but mebbeso they don't know it. Old Turkey Tracks has enough though."

Then he thought of the granddaughter out there on the desert—and those two waterless killers coming on her. With slitted eyes the manhunter rode out onto the desert.

Out in the desert two men riding westward. Hard-eyed men with mean, tight mouths. A heavy-set man with a week's beard on a beefy face rode tilted over in the saddle. He had rigged a rope sling that ran from the saddle horn down under his left knee, holding it up. He held to the saddle horn with both hands. His face was drawn with pain.

The other was younger, slim, with light hair and eyes. His eyebrows were so light as to be unnoticeable, giving the light eyes a curiously snakelike look. A bundle in a grain sack was tied securely behind the saddle.

The heavy one felt gingerly of his wounded leg, cursed, and complained, "I'm thinking we'd a done better to have hit it for the border. This ain't no good."

The younger one snarled and cursed, "Oh lay off me. This is the way we planned it ain't it? That damned Ranger has hightailed it for the border. We figured that all out didn't we?"

The wounded man grumbled again, "What'd you want to beef that cashier for Slim? That'll get us in trouble yet."

Slim cursed and pulled up his horse to stare with mad unblinking eyes, "Will you shut your yawp or will I shut it for you?"

The wounded man groaned and tried to ease his leg. After a little he said, "What say we take a little water?"

Slim yelled at him, "No! I done told you we ain't drinking till night, and damn little then."

The wounded man mopped his dirty, sweaty pain drawn face and mumbled something. Then he looked back over his shoulder.

When Slim saw the wounded man look back over his shoulder he, too, looked back.

The wounded man mumbled, "Do you reckon we ditched that damn Ranger?"

Slim said, "Sure," but there was no conviction in his voice.

They plodded on into desert. The sun dropped lower and lower ahead of them sending its searing heat into their red faces. They rode up short rocky slopes and down the other side. They rode around clumps of ocatills and pickly pear and past the whitish groups of the poisonous cholla. Red lizards ran on hot red rocks and stared at them from beady little eyes. They skirted white alholi sinks and the white dust burned cracked lips and their red, inflamed eyes were painful.

The horses traveled with lowered listless heads. Black streaks of wet sweat ran down from under the saddle blankets.

The wounded man grumbled again, his mouth twisting with pain, "By gawd this leg hurts." Then he said, "If you hadn't acted like a crazy fool and gone to shooting we'd a got twice what we did, and we wouldn't a lost Joe and I wouldn't a got this leg."

Slim snarled, "Go on. Go on. Keep yawping."

Suddenly the wounded man pulled up his horse. His voice was hoarse as he shouted, "By gawd I can't stand it. I gotta have water, and I'm going to."

He unslung the canteen from his saddlehorn, held it up by his ear and shook it. He said, "gawd," an began to drink. He drank thirstily, deeply,

drew a great sigh of relief and drank again.

Slim had quit shouting. He hissed at him now, "Go on. Go on. Go on and drink it up. Then see what happens to you." He eyed the wounded man, hating him, telling him, "And if you think you gets a whack at my canteen you're a damn fool."

The wounded man held the empty canteen to his ear and shook it. He turned it up to his mouth again, waiting to see if more water ran out. Convinced it was empty he took it away from cracked lips and looked around. He saw only the empty desert and a hot red sun sinking in the horizon. His bloodshot eyes came back to Slim. His eyes came away from Slim's glaring eyes, quickly, and slid down to the canteen hanging on Slims saddle. He muttered, "I'm wounded. And I'm going to need water."

Slim snarled at him, jeering, "Sure you're going to need water. And try and get it."

THEY kicked up their listless horses and plodded on into the sunset. From time to time they looked back over their shoulders. They rode down a rocky slope and crossed a wide sandy wash. The wounded man said, "There's been water here sometime."

Slim said, "Yeah, mebbeso year before last and mebbeso year after next. Why don't you wait here?"

The wounded one muttered, "Damn you."

They started up the farther slope and the wounded one said, "You ride ahead Slim. My horse'll travel easier if you give him a lead."

Slim snarled, "Me ride ahead of you! And get shot in the back?"

The other man said, "Aw now Slim, what's the good of talking that way? We're in this fix together ain't we?"

Slim said, "It's you that's in the fix.

I ain't in no fix."

The wounded one said, "Well, damn you."

They went over the crest into the sun and Slim half yelled, "Look!"

The wounded one crowded his horse up close to look down at a string of burro tracks.

Slim said, "Burros!" He rode along the trail, peering intently. "Four burros," he said, "Fresh." A little later he pronounced, "And a man on foot. Some old desert rat of a prospector."

The two men looked at each other, delight, and hope, growing in bloodshot eyes. The wounded one half whispered, "There'll be water on them burros!"

Slim said, "Surest thing you know."

Without another word they started trailing the burros. Even the horses seemed to have taken heart from something. On occasional level stretches they trotted.

The wounded man asked, "How far you think he is ahead of us, Slim?"

Slim said, "Can't be far. Them is fresh tracks and burros travel slow." They kicked at their horses and got a little speed out of them.

Just under the crest of a ridge they went slowly, edging up to the top slowly, looking ahead, intently. The sun had dropped into the head haze and seemed to hang here, blood red, enormous.

The wounded one cursed the sun, bitterly, for being there, blinding their eyes to what they hoped to see. Up on the ridge they sat their horses and peered from hand shaded eyes into the sunset, searching the desert, looking for a little string of four plodding burros.

Slim said, "We better ride. Follow the trail long as we can see afore dark."

The other nodded and turned his head to look back to the east, relieved at turning his smarting eyes away from

the sun. He started to turn his eyes away and then held them, staring out over the back trail a long time.

Slim snarled, "What's eating you? Come on."

The other muttered, "I seen something." He kept on staring and then spoke more firmly. "There 'tis."

Slim brought his horse up to the other, asking, impatiently, "Where's what?"

The other pointed a dirty finger. "See," he said. "Jest below that little red mesa. Can't you see it? Moving. Now it's gone. Wait."

Slim spoke impatiently, "Oh hell. Come on. You're seeing things."

The other pointed again, his voice animated, "There! Look quick. You got him against that white ledge."

Slim looked a long time. Then under his breath he said, "I git it. It's a man horseback!"

The other spoke their common thought, "It couldn't be that damn Ranger."

Slim said, "Hell no. We didn't come that way. We came from off to the left. That man ain't trailing us. More'n likely he's somebody like us, on the dodge."

The other said, "Yes we did too. That's jest the way we come."

They looked at each other, then the wounded one said, "That damned Ranger is on our trail!"

They turned their horses then to follow the burro trail. Slim said, "We gotta get that desert rat's water. With plenty a water we can lay out and ambush that damn Ranger. With him gone and plenty water we are sitting pretty."

The wounded one pleaded, "Now we're going to have water, Slim, give me a mite of yourn."

Slim snarled at him, "No!" We ain't got that water yet and I ain't aiming to take no chances." He kicked up his

horse, spurring him cruelly, carefully looking back to watch the wounded one, snarling at him, "Hit some life in that plug, can't you? Going to be dark directly."

On another ridge they looked back again into the dusky twilight shadows. The blood red sun after seeming to hang a long time, stationary, above the horizon had dropped beyond the dim line of the Faraway Hills. The long black shadows of sunset went out too and a grey, silent dusky lay over the desolate land.

The wounded one said, "Mebbe he'll lose our trail in the night."

Slim spurred his horse again, savagely, snarling, "Come on. Damn that Ranger. He won't lose nothing—'cept his life."

TWO hours after sunrise old Turkey Tracks and his granddaughter made camp. A ledge of red sandstone promised shade for all day. The little, white haired old prospector stumped around, busily, unpacking four mouse colored burros. He placed two water kegs carefully in the shade, talking more to himself than to the girl, "Hell now Ann," he said, "which kag did we use of last? Gotta keep 'em even."

The girl smiled, saying, "Can't you talk at all Granddad without saying 'Hell'?"

The old desert rat answered, quite seriously, "Hell yes."

The girl threw up her lovely head and laughed. The old man looked at her for a minute, then chuckled.

The girl was dressed in blue jeans and heavy shoes. A blue jean jumper covered a flannel shirt. She swept off a wide brimmed black hat and the desert sun warmed her hair to spun copper. She busied herself unsaddling her saddle burro, then walked around after wood. She came back with an armful of dead ocatilla stalks, remark-

ing, "Those hills look just as far away as ever."

The old desert rat chuckled, "Hell yes," he said. "That's the way it is in the desert. But we'll pull out late this afternoon and we'll be in them Faraway Hills come noon tomorrow."

He went on, "You throw some grub together Ann while I look after the burros." As he walked away he stopped and told her, "You can have all the water you want now Ann. Plenty to last us through from here. Hell yes."

The girl made a fire and fixed bacon and coffee and biscuits in a Dutch oven. When it was ready she rested. It began to seem a long time that the old man had gone. She put the breakfast close to dying fire and walked around to the end of the red ledge. The sun struck her a hot blow.

The four mouse-colored burros stood half on a little hillside, completely indifferent to the world they were so used to. She called out, "Granddad."

There was not even an echo. Her voice seemed to fall flat, dead, as if she had never spoken. Suddenly she realized the vastness, the desolation, the loneliness of the desert. She walked hurriedly back to the little bed of white ashes. After a moment of uncertainty she pulled her grandfathers short 44-40 Winchester from the scabboard on her saddle and stood it up against a rock. Then she smiled, saying, "Stupid. He'll be here in a minute."

She stood listening intently then she heard a rock roll and smiled with relief. She laid out tin plates and cups and heard more rocks roll. She heard horses but had no time to sort out the noises.

A horse snorted and she whirled, wide eyed, to see a man on a horse. The man's lips were cracked and his bloodshot eyes were fastened on the water kegs. He croaked, "Gawd!"

He began to climb off the half dead horse, looking at the girl without seeing her. He croaked, "Water! Damn you, water."

The girl continued to stare, horrified, then her face flushed with quick sympathy. She said, "Yes. Yes. There's plenty of water." She picked up a small pail and filled it, hurriedly, from a keg. "But not too much," she warned.

The girl watched the man drink, drink avidly, drunkenly, tipping the little pail higher and higher. The water ran around his mouth and down over his chin. She took hold of the pail warning him, "That's enough. Wait a while."

The man took the pail from his mouth, his light eyes went insane with rage and he struck the girl, savagely. Then he put the pail back to his mouth.

The girl stood back, her face an angry red. She put her hand up to her cheek where she had been struck and her blue eyes turned purple. Then she thought, "The poor man. He's crazy."

Another horse came on stumbling feet and a heavy set man with his leg tied to the saddle horn was struggling with the rope. He slid off the horse, his wounded leg collapsed and he fell at full length.

He got painfully to his hands and knees staring, bleary eyed, up at the man drinking. He croaked, "Give me that water, Slim." Then he began fumbling for his six-shooter and pointed it unsteadily at Slim.

Slim took the empty pail from his face and drew a deep breath. He looked at the man on the ground, yelled, "You would, would you?" and kicked the man's six-shooter from his hand. Then he brutally kicked the poor man in the face.

Slim held the pail out to the girl, ordering her, "Fill it."

THE girl, pale-faced, looked at Slim with growing fear and loathing. She filled the pail again, ignoring Slim, and walked over to the man on the ground. She helped him to his knees and then held the pail to his gasping lips. After a long drink she took it away and the man reached for it roughly. He pulled it away from the girl, spilling half of it and began drinking again in great gasping gulps.

The girl picked up the six-shooter. The heavy Colt gave her assurance. Slim looked at her with a crooked grin. Then his eyes began to take her in. He noticed the long legs, the swelling breasts under the blue jumper. He leered at her, asking, "Where'd you come into this?"

The girl faced him. "My grandfather will be here in a minute."

Slim leered at her, asking, "Will he?"

The girl was suddenly filled with intolerable fear. The man's voice carried an assurance that her grandfather would not come back, would never come back.

Slim stepped over to the wounded man and yanked the pail away. He held it out to the girl ordering her, "Fill it."

The girl said, "I won't," and lifted the pistol. Like a flash Slim was on her, wrenching the gun from her hand, twisting her arms up behind her back until she gasped with pain. Then yanked her back to his horse, undid the rope and tied her hands, tripped her up and tied her feet.

She set up and heard the wounded one say, "I seen him back there. Did you plug him?"

Slim answered casually, "Naw. I slugged him. But he'll croak out there in the sun."

The girl struggled with her faintness and horror.

They watered their horses and had to fight them, brutally, to keep them

from drinking themselves to death. They looked at the breakfast waiting by the bed of ashes. Slim said, "We'll have a big feed afterward. We got to git busy now."

The wounded one hobbled around, groaning. He said, "That water done me a lot of good. It ain't so bad." Then he asked, "What we going to do with the gal?"

Slim answered, "We ain't going to do nothing." He snarled, "The gal goes with me."

The other man half closed his blood-shot eyes, asking, "Yeah?"

Slim said, "Yeah."

Slim dropped that to say, "I ought to 'ave dragged that old rat off our trail. Now we'll have to go out beyond him to waylay that damn Ranger if he's still looking for us." They moved over to their horses.

The girl heard them and a great hope came to her. She heard them say "Ranger" and that they were going to waylay the Ranger and kill him. She closed her eyes and prayed for the Ranger.

A rock rolled and like a flash the men were behind their horses, six-shooters ready, snarling like trapped coyotes.

The girl opened her eyes and saw her grandfather coming around the end of the ledge, coming on stumbling feet, groping in the hot sunlight. His white hair was black with dried blood. He was mumbling, "Ann. Ann. Annie girl."

The wounded robber sniggered. "Well look who's here. We got company ain't we?" Then he snarled, "Thought you croaked him. This time we'll make it stick."

The girl struggled frantically with the ropes that held her. She was frantic with fear and horror, not believing that such horrible things could really happen. She yelled at the outlaws, "You'll

pay for this. You let him alone. You let him alone I tell you!"

The old man paid no attention to the outlaws. He hardly seemed to see them. He came struggling on, his eyes wavering around in search of the girl. He passed close to Slim.

Slim raised his six-shooter, a crazy light in his whitish eyes. The girl screamed and a cold voice snapped out of the air to say, "Drop it!"

With incredible swiftness Slim whirled and shot from the hip, and shot again.

The wounded one sank to one knee, shooting out from under his horse. The horse reared and jumped and came down with both fore feet on the man, knocking him down.

Slim was crouching, shooting at a tall dark hawk-faced man who came forward with a gun in each hand.

The roar of the shots echoed against the ledge and a little stream of sand poured down over the edge. The man knocked flat by the horse got to his knees again and began groping around for his gun.

THE wild sound of the shots cleared old Turkey Tracks' brain and he grabbed up his rifle from where the girl had left it. As the wounded man recovered his gun and began to lift it, old Turkey Tracks dropped him neatly.

Turkey Tracks turned the rifle on Slim and then lowered it. Slim had dropped his gun. He stood there, his hands at his side, looking profoundly astonished, as though some incredible thing had happened to him. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Old Turkey Tracks let out a croaked yell, dropping the rifle to grab at the man. "Hell," he yelled. "It's Stark. John Stark of the Rangers."

They talked it over all day long in the shade of the ledge. Old Turkey Tracks with a bandage around his white head; John Stark with his dark eyes following the girl; the girl with demure eyes sometimes letting him see her thoughts.

"No," old Turkey Tracks pronounced. "We're going on. There's water enough to git us to the Faraway Hills and git you back to the Sacatone. Hell, I've got something good this time," he boasted.

The Ranger and the girl looked at each other and smiled. These old prospectors always had something good.

They packed and saddled at sunset, to go their own ways in the cool of the night.

John Stark asked old Turkey Tracks, "When will you be in Tucson again?"

The old desert rat started to scratch his head and remembered his wound. "Hell," he said, "Reckon we'll have to come in after grub in about a month."

John Stark was up on the big bay looking down at the girl. He told old Turkey Tracks, "You report at Headquarters when you get in." He kept his eyes on the girl's eyes as he said, "Those are orders."

Old Turkey Tracks chuckled, "Hell," he said, "why not?"

The girl flushed and her eyes clung to his. She nodded her head as though agreeing to something yet unspoken, "I'll see that he does," she said.



Empty Saddles Mean War!

By MORSE CHANDLER

Author of "When a Colt-Loose Kid Hits Leather," etc.

The kid had been an outlaw only four hours and his heart and his gunhand hadn't had a chance to harden!



The pursuit was hammering hard on his trail!

THE Soldado Mountains were safe only for those outside the pale of the law, a kind of "Hole in the Wall" of New Mexico. This thought was uppermost in the mind of Kid McCord, as, standing beside his red roan in the shelter of a rocky outcrop, he watched the covered wagon crawl up the steep grade, the team

straining valiantly in response to whip and shout. Neither the outfit nor its driver, a timeworn, Stetson-crowned individual, had for McCord more than passing interest; what had magnetized his attention, rowelled his curiosity, was the slim, girlish figure occupying the other half of the wagon-box. The Soldados, haven of cattle rustler, road

agent and killer, were no place for women, especially one with such a face as the girl beside the old-timer had.

As the wagon reached the top of the grade and rolled out upon the level, the old man "whoa-ed" loudly and let the reins fall slack on the backs of the sweating horses. Kid McCord swung into the saddle and rode from his shelter toward them.

"Howdy, folks?" he greeted, drawing rein beside the wagon and touching fingers to hat brim. "I don't want to horn in none or tell you your business—but ain't you off the trail a mite?"

"As to how?" issued question from the driver's full-bearded lips, while he studied sharply, from under shaggy brows, the fine-figured horseman, whose cowpunch garb in such a neighborhood meant nothing; he might be a rustler, road agent, anything. However, the old man's scrutiny was rather satisfying, particularly of the McCord level eyes and firm mouth. No hint of guile or cruelty in either; he wore but one gun, and that untied, and a rawhide riata neatly coiled in the tie-straps. He didn't look by any means deadly and this was a domain of lawless men.

Replied the Kid, almost unconscious of the inspection, by reason of a back-thrown sunbonnet which disclosed masses, highly piled, of corn-colored hair, "Why, these here mountains is hidin' place for most every sheriff-dodger in two hundred miles. You ought've drove around 'em, mister, not through 'em, an' better you'd turn round right quick—"

"I'm headin' the right way—into 'em deep as I can git!" The driver's statement surprised McCord mightily, but his vehemence was wholly convincing.

"You've done somethin'," said the Kid, "that makes it necessary—"

"To run from the sheriff—yep!" The old man's lips smacked out the affirmative sharply. Then, abruptly, he

interrogated: "Ain't you?"

Kid McCord nodded and loosened his lips in a grim smile. "You betche! Hangin' a man."

The driver's eyebrows went up a trifle, while the girl regarded him steadily, her glance unfathomable to the Kid.

Quoth the driver: "That's a leetle somethin' new—mine's shootin'. I was servin' justice, young feller, but the law wouldn't look at it that way—so here I am. You call yourself—?"

"In the Soldados," answered the Kid, "it's ag'in the rules to ask a man his name—so *I've heard*. Only been here two—three hours myself. But I'll tell you, it's Kid McCord."

The driver's hat brim bobbed. "Ezra Earp. My darter, June," turning his glance toward the girl. "An' I will say, McCord, the most loyal darter what ever a man had. When I had to run she wouldn't stay behind. Hated to bring her into such a rattler's nest as these mountings has the name o' bein'!"

"Well," said the Kid, "the Soldados is all that's been said of 'em, an' mebbe some more. Sun's goin' down. What say we camp yonder by that crick an' sorta talk things over." He quailed in his heart to think what might befall a girl of June Earp's appearance far back in the range where rustlers and train robbers and hombres of like outlaw professions had their camps. Earp himself could take chances, but it wasn't fair to allow the girl to do the same. The Kid had been an outlaw only four hours and his conscience hadn't had a chance to toughen—nor his heart!

E ARP agreed to the suggestion that they camp. Darkness found the three of them gathered around a small fire. The girl did the cooking and it was mighty eatable, thought the Kid. He watched her constantly, his wide Stetson brim disguising the fact, and

wondered if her reticence meant that she had taken a dislike to him. If he had killed, so had her father.

Earp waxed talkative over his pipe, while June was clearing up. Crime of any kind was evidently new to him and he was glad to have a kindred ear in which to pour the details. "Feller ranchin' near me in Cactus Valley tried to make up to June there. I always thought he was a snake an' 'bjected. Warned him to let her alone. She didn't like him no mor'n I did. But he kep' comin' to see her now an' then. Final I told him I'd shoot if he set foot on my premises ag'in. He didn't say nothin' when he went away that time. It ought've warned me, but my skull was too thick. He waited till I was off on the range 's mornin', come to my place an' *put his dirty paws on my June!* Tried to carry her off, by God! Well, by luck she got a-hold o' a gun an' drove him away. He handled her so rough she fainted after he'd gone, an' that's the way I found her. She didn't want to tell me what'd happened, knowin' I'd swore to kill—but it was an easy guess for me an' I oiled up my shooter. Went right after the polecat, over to his ranch, havin' first some leetle difficulty shakin' off June—for my sake, not t'other feller's. I found Gant at his place an' I looked at him through the smoke. Then I rode back an' got my wagon an' June an' hit the trail for here."

The Kid was looking at him with a puzzled expression as he finished his narrative. "Gant, you said, the hombre's name was—Joe Gant?"

"Yeh, Joe Gant. Know him?"

"Some. What time you kill him?"

Earp hooked the pipe out of his mouth, staring in turn. "*What time?* Why? Well, about three hours ago."

"*Joe Gant?*" The Kid leaned forward. "Why, Earp, I hung that galoot to the cottonwood front of his house

easy *four* hours ago."

"Not Joe Gant, you didn't," Earp shook his head positively. "I know!—what's that?" he broke off, as a great clamor arose down by the pass that gave entrance to the Soldados. Both Earp and the Kid cocked their ears. Numerous hoofs were beating on the flinty trail, coming up and toward them.

"Hossmen," said Earp.

"An' cattle," added the Kid. "Rustlers drivin' in swiped stock. That happens right along in these mountains. They're safe from the sheriff once they're through that pass."

"Ain't it a danged shame," began Earp, himself a ranchman in a small way, and then thought of his own loss of honest citizenship on the range, his descent to the level, or below, of these cattle-lifters approaching. He became suddenly silent and dropped his head.

June, standing by and comprehending swiftly, stooped and laid a comradely hand on his shoulder. She would share his exile, she who had been the indirect cause of it. Earp lifted his head at her touch, his eyes warming with affection.

THE Kid, witness to this brief bit of heart-play, half rose to his feet as the trampling of the cattle, punctuated by the lighter staccato of swift-footed ponies, drew nearer.

"They'll pass by on the trail but they can see over here plumb plain," he crisped. "Best they shouldn't know you're hereabouts, Miss Earp."

At the Kid's words her father started up. "McCord's right. Jump in the wagon, June. That'll sure hide you."

She turned to comply, slowly, as if she did not share the apprehension of the men. She didn't, thought the Kid, because she did not realize the gravity of her position here in this stronghold of lawless men. As the girl disappeared

through the rear opening in the wagon cover, the hooking, lowing herd crowded past on the rock trail, fifty yards or so from the camp of the Earps and McCord.

The Kid and old Ezra were hunched over the fire, apparently conversing, but in reality listening and hoping that none of the horsemen conveying the herd would take it into their heads to ride over. Ordinarily the Earp-McCord camp would not have been bothered. It was an unwritten law of the lawless who lived in the Soldados that none of the many camps distributed through the mountains should molest or interfere in any way with one another. One camp might be that of cattle rustlers, another road agents, another smugglers, all engaged in separate criminal callings, but all living together, as in one great rock fort, for mutual protection. But one member of this particular stock-stealing gang returning from a raid was a curious individual, a minder of other people's business. The covered wagon caught his eye as he was riding by at the tail of the herd. It looked like newcomers to the stronghold of the hunted; a wagon was an uncommon sight here. He wondered what was in it. Once his curiosity was aroused he must somehow satisfy it. He spurred from his position in the drag, out among the boulders to the open space where the fire burned.

The Kid and Ezra Earp turned their heads as the horseman slashed in with a strident, "Howdy?" He pulled up, got down, his glance trailing rapidly over the two faces that were unfamiliar to him, then resting a long moment on the wagon beyond the fire.

"Just get in?" said the rustler, pushing back his Mexican sombrero. "Gun-runnin'?" jerking his head toward the wagon. "Well, snakes!" As he spat the exclamation, he bent over, his eyes

lighting, fastened on something beside the fire to the left of Earp.

Earp and the Kid shifted their eyes, following his glance. A sun-bonnet—June's! She'd dropped it and they hadn't noticed. The Kid could have kicked himself—and Ezra! Where had their eyes been!

The Mexican-hatted waddy squatted down, mightily interested. He was a white man, though he affected greaser gear, even to Chihuahua spurs. "Sol!" he said, in an oily voice, "you're bringin' a moharrie in, eh? Where's she at? Don't be stingy, hombres, let's see—"

THAT was as far as he got. He was next to the Kid who suddenly lifted with a growl deep in his throat and falling on the rustler, beat him flat and insensible with the barrel of his quickly drawn pistol.

"You see," said McCord, standing above the senseless form, "what would happen to your girl, Earp, if you shoved on into the mountains. You—"

From out of the darkness uptrail, the direction taken by the cattle thieves, a voice bawled, "Hey, Brazos, you comin'? What's keepin' you?"

A streak of fortune, thought the Kid, who had acted on hot impulse, that the other tail-rider had not seen his comrade struck down. McCord was quick witted. He foresaw dire calamity to the Earps—to June Earp—if Brazos did not rejoin his gang immediately. Instantly the Kid called, "I'm comin'," in the best imitation of Brazo's voice he could muster: not a good imitation by any means, but passable on account of the noise made by the cattle blundering along in the dark. Stooping, McCord snatched the big sombrero from the fallen man, tossed his own hat at Earp's feet and hissed:

"Take it, my hoss, an' your girl, an' yourself, an' quit these mountains pronto. An' stay out, if you got any

love for her, an' I reckon you have. Hide somewheres near the pass an' I'll join you later."

He stood up then, Brazos' conical, bullion-trimmed hat down about his ears and jumped for the waddy's horse, swung up and rode for the main trail, leaving a much perturbed and marvelous Earp squatting by the fire.

CHAPTER II

THE Kid could have made a getaway, aided by the darkness and the confusion attending the drive over the rough, dark trail, at almost any moment after he quit Earp. But he didn't try. He would be chased, and the only way out of the Soldados, by the pass, led past the late scene of his impulsive knockdown. He wanted the Earps to have ample time to clear the dangerous neighborhood and hoped old Ezra would have the sense to tie up Brazos before leaving the campsite. The outlaw would not have remained unconscious very long.

Doing his part and more, Kid McCord hung on as drag-rider of the stolen herd through semi-darkness that sometimes led up and sometimes down, but seldom straightaway. There was a full moon, but little of its light reached the twisting trail. Steep walls on either hand for more than half the distance to the waddy rendezvous were responsible for this blocking of the moonlight, but the rock formation was in another way an assistance to the gang, keeping the cattle from scattering. The cows go only forward or backward and the rustlers prodded them steadily forward.

In less than an hour lights flashed ahead. It was a little rockbound side valley, flooded with moonlight into which the herd emerged. There were

two or three shacks, in the open doors and windows of which the lights gleamed, and several large stockade corrals. Into these latter the cattle were punched and penned up. They filled two of the corrals, and the Kid, a top hand when he was working at his regular business, estimated their number at three or four hundred. Quite a bunch at one swipe! Some rancher back in Cactus Valley was sore that night, he'd bet on it!

The Kid, because of the strenuous saddlework required en route to the waddy camp, had been able to avoid conversation or contact with his companion in the drag, a foul-mouthed hombre who had gone about his work with oaths and obscenity dripping continually off his chin. Now, in camp, and the cattle safely impounded, probably to await alteration of their brands on the morrow, the rustlers would gather together and the Kid's thin disguise would be penetrated. His eyes sought the dark avenue by which he had entered this side valley. He might have made a dash for it, but several riders were in between. Anyhow, a sudden dash might not be the best way to go about it. He hadn't a doubt that the mounted men carried rifles in their saddle boots and a bullet from a Winchester would be more effective in heading him off than horsemen across his path. Only a novice could have missed in the strong moonlight. So the Kid debated with a cool brain. He'd have to sidle nearer to the out trail before he ran. Now the men were getting off their horses, which behooved him to think and act quickly. If he didn't dismount too, they'd get suspicious, but he must stick to the horse if he hoped to escape. He was riding by one of the shacks while his mind churned over the situation and a man, standing in the doorway, drew the Kid's attention.

"'Lo, Brazos," called the man. "See you made a pretty fair gatherin'. Point over here. I want to see you."

THE Kid was in for it! But he momentarily forgot the pressing peril when he glanced at the speaker. The voice had sounded somehow familiar, a glance in its direction well nigh stunned him. The light from the shack revealed the owner of the voice as Joe Gant, ranchman of Cactus Valley, the same man the Kid had treated to a strangulation jig that afternoon, the man Ezra Earp declared he had drilled with a six-shooter! There was no mistake—Joe Gant as large as life and in perfect health apparently, when two men could have sworn on a stack of Bibles that they had put him over the jump!

"You hear me, Brazos, or you got mud in your ears?" shouted Gant angrily, for the Kid was riding on.

The Kid made no reply—in words. He acted: slid down Apache-style, on the far side of his horse, hanging by hand and toe, and struck into a gallop. In the hand he wasn't using to hold on he gripped his Colt and he fired under the horse's neck, but missed. It would take practice to shoot accurately in this unaccustomed position and before he could launch a second shot, Gant moved hurriedly away from the door, realizing what a fine target he made.

From inside the shack Gant shouted at the top of his leather lungs: "After him, boys. If that's Brazos he's gone loco, but I reckon it ain't Brazos; somebody else wearin his hat!"

The hat in question had dropped from the Kid's head as he swung down. It was much too big and he didn't need it any longer. What he wanted was room and he proceeded to get it for himself by firing at the two rustlers, back in their saddles at the first shot, who now tried to bar his way. He

must have hit the right-hand rider, for the fellow doubled up in the saddle. The other swerved and the Kid pounded by, shooting again under the horse's neck. The upright waddy was swinging his gun as the Kid sped on, trying to locate some portion of the flying horseman's anatomy where he might place a bullet. By the time he had decided to shoot the horse first and its rider afterward, both had vanished through the dark outlet down the high-walled trail. But the vanishing of the Kid didn't end it. Nobody had an idea who he was, except that he must be an enemy, somebody masquerading in Brazos Slayden's hat. Every man had remounted. One or two had had the saddles off their cayuses. They slapped them on again. Gant ran down to the horse-corral and got himself a horse. The pursuit strung out of the rockbound side valley and one, two, three, up to a dozen, along the trail traveled by the Kid.

On his part the Kid was exulting. The hard job had been getting out; with them behind him he had a plan for jacking up the pursuit; had no intention of leading them through the pass near which he had told Earp to seek concealment. So when the pursuing hoofs were striking sparks from the rocks uncomfortably close in his wake, the Kid executed his stunt. He dismounted with his horse going at full speed, drove it down a draw and let the pursuit sweep after it, while he himself proceeded on foot toward the pass.

It was about two hours from the time he quit the waddy camp on the run that McCord, more than a little footsore from walking rock in high heels, arrived at the pass into—also out of—the Soldados. Passing the former camp-site of the Earps and himself—he had seen from the trail that they were gone—and quitting the

mountains, he set about locating them.

EARP had very craftily secreted himself in a hollow at the foot of the Soldados to the right of the pass. The Kid found the camp because he was looking for it, because he knew Earp must be somewhere nearby. Otherwise he never would have suspected that three human beings, three horses and a wagon were in the vicinity. Earp had had the sense not to light a fire, not even his pipe. The hollow was deep and easily accommodated humans, animals and outfit: the blanket of night made it the most secure of retreats, provided an enemy was not forewarned of their presence, and a thick fringe of trees and brush on the rim rendered it an excellent covert by day. As Earp could scarcely have known of the place beforehand, the Kid complimented his careful selection of a hideout as he finally fell on it himself and pushed among the trees and brush.

"McCord?" hissed a voice in the black darkness ahead.

"Sure," replied the Kid.

"Good you made a noise comin' in," said Earp's voice again, nearer this time, "for I had a finger on the trigger an' I'd 'a' crooked 'er if you'd come sneakin'. Well, you made out—or—you wouldn't be here."

"Skin o' my teeth," declared the Kid, perceiving now the darker bulk of Earp against a dark background. "You hadn't no trouble? Bueno! What about Brazos?"

"He's down there in the holler," replied Earp, turning as the Kid brushed him and falling into step. "Showed signs o' comin' to, just after you rode off, so I slammed him ag'in with a gun an' then hobbled him with his sash an' hanker. He's got up all Mexican, yet he ain't one."

They scrambled and slid now to the bottom of the hollow, where the white

cover of the wagon somewhat relieved the blackness. The voice of June Earp greeted the Kid from somewhere near it, the first time she had addressed him directly.

"I'm—we're awfully glad you're back. It was mighty brave o' you to do what you did. I hadn't any idea, Mr. McCord, how the outlaws in there would act toward me. I knew—when I heard that Brazos talkin'."

"Yeh, he was—is—a sample. Kid, please, Miss Earp," said Mr. McCord.

"June, then," said Miss Earp. "Of all fool things, droppin' my sunbonnet. If I hadn't—"

"I might not've learned somethin'," the Kid was guilty of interrupting, facing the dim white oval that was the girl's face. "I found Joe Gant in there at the rustlers' camp. Yes, sir!" as Earp at his side started to explode. "Joe Gant, live an' kickin'—or his double. An' I reckon the Lord had the hoss sense not to make only one o' his kind. I'm makin' no mistake, Earp; he spoke to me, as Brazos, an' I saw him plain in lamp light. What do you figger, Earp?"

"I just don't," replied the old man. "I shot plumb straight, I'll take oath an' the bullet was made o' lead, by grab! I seen him fall an' lay on the floor o' his office, plumb still."

"An' he had stopped kickin'," said the Kid, "when I rode away from the tree he was lookin' up—a *hour before you shot him!* Earp, our trails is crossed a heap an' that's whatever. We both is sure we killed Gant, an' yet he's alive."

"That reminds me," said Earp, "that you didn't say what for you'd—uh—hung him. You want to?"

"SURE," said the Kid. "It was justice, in a way, though not as strong as your case. I'd been punchin' for him a month, liked him well enough

an' the outfit, too, thinkin' 'em straight as string. Foreman complained o' rustlin', so did the men, but Gant, though he seemed worried sometimes, didn't say nothin'. Sheriff McKell at Fairchance was keen to grab somebody for it, but all trails led to these here Soldados, an' after they went in, it left him hands up. Well, 's mornin' I was ridin' up the north end o' Cactus Valley, where the Forty Mile River makes the big bend. A lot o' cattle, JG's, had gone down the trail between the cut banks to drink. Noticed a considerable heap o' bawlin' goin' on an' located a calf out in midstream, fightin' the swift current, which was slow but sure carryin' it away an' it's mammy makin' most o' the noise, while tryin' to reach the pore li'l critter. Well, I seen the calf was losin', so unstrapped my rawhide, left the roan top o' the cut bank an' avalanched down. I wouldn't trust my boss' legs on that trail. Judged forty feet would just about make the youngster an' slung 'er out an' snaked the li'l feller inshore, the ol' lady follerin' an' tryin' to gore me for helpin' the kid. I went up the cut bank a hanged sight faster'n I come down. But, by golly, I forgot that cow critter's ingratitude when I looked over to where I'd left the roan standin'. 'Stead o' the roan, a grey cayuse that I never remembered seein' on the JG was trailing its reins, an' all sweatin' an' fagged. Bug-eyed, I tracked over an' looked it up an' down. It sure had traveled plenty hard an' I noticed the rope was missin' off the saddle.

Just about that time I heard a bunch o' hoofs an' lookin' back at the buttes, there came riders hellbent around the edge, Sheriff McKell headin' 'em. Natcherel, I just stood still an' let 'em come up. But what you think? Says the Sheriff, stern, 'So you're one o' the waddies, huh, McCord?' I told him he's locoed, till he cut me short, sayin'

him an' the rest had caught me an' a Mexican brand-blottin' in the bresh an' chased us, that the color o' my hoss an' its condition gimme away even though they hadn't seen my face. 'We got you,' says McKell, 'an' the greaser, what you parted from, we'll get later.' An' he got down an' was gettin' out the come-alongs when I told him to listen, an' I told him so hard he did listen, an' the others too. I showed him my wet rope, told him what I'd been doin' told him how I'd been ridin' a roan an' found the grey hoss when I come up the bank. But he wouldn't believe me, none of 'em, an' then along come Joe Gant, ridin' around the buttes like the possay had, forkin' my *red roan*! Gant, bold as brass, wanted to know what's goin' on when he rode up, an' after he'd heard the Sheriff's yarn an' my yarn, he turned on me savage. 'So you're one that's been wolfin' my stock!' he shouts, usin' a tone I'd never heard before. 'You been with me just a month an' you didn't bring no recommend, just yourself an' ridin'-gear an' a ton o' alkali you'd picked up footin' it. Ought've knowed better'n to sign on a plumb stranger, but I'm soft-hearted. This'll cure me.' I wondered why you rode the grey this mornin' when I found the roan you usually fork in the corral; the grey's faster an' you figgered you might have to travel fast. So you caught him red-handed, eh?' he says to McKell. 'Well, take him.' But the Sheriff didn't.

I thought it queer Gant should be brand-blottin' his own stock, but the whole danged deal was queer—an' I knowed Gant was a crook an' tryin' to put the blame on me. He was sittin' his hoss right close, I dogged sudden, jumped up behind him, punched my gun into him an' promised to shoot if the Sheriff moved. I'd noticed there was no rifles in the crowd, so ordered Gant to back the roan. When we'd

covered about two hundred feet that-away an' the Colts was useless, I ordered Gant to swing around an' dug in the spurs. We went skimmin' around the buttes. After us come slashin' the possay. Soon seen if I wanted to get away I'd have to dump Gant, which I did. I'd 'a' shot him then, but wanted to bump him off the way he'd figgered for me—by the rope. I played hide-an' find me with that possay on the JG range for nigh two hours an' they didn't find me. I worked around to the ranch-house when I'd lost 'em for good, meanin' to hide there an' get Gant when he come in. But I didn't have to wait none. He was there. What do you think? The yella dawg tried to make out he didn't know what I was talkin' about when I stepped into his office holdin' a drop. I took a rope off the wall, havin' too much respect for my rawhide to hang such a kiote with it, an' put it round his big bull neck an' drove him out under the cottonwood. Well," as he detected a little gasp from June Earp. "I won't go into no more details. But I left him danglin'. He'd branded me a cattle thief an' I might's well go the whole hog."

"You done right!" Earp declared, in vindictive key. "By grab, that's a remarkable yarn. Puts anything I ever heard plumb in the shade. Ain't so, June?"

"Sure is," agreed June. "And do you think, Kid,"—McCord's blood raced a little faster—"maybe the Mexican the Sheriff spoke of was Brazos?"

THERE was a pause before the Kid replied. "That's headwork, I'd tell a man," he exclaimed. "No, I hadn't thought of it, June. But I bet you're right. Where you got Brazos tied? I'll—no, I'll wait 'll mornin' an' question him some. Folks, if we work careful, we're just about goin' to bust open a big mystery. Puttin' two and

two together—what happened to me on the JG an' me findin' Gant in the mountains with that gang—shows him up as workin' two characters, rancher in Cactus Valley, boss rustler in the Soldados. Hell's bells!"

"Think we'd better risk goin' back to town?" questioned Earp. "If Gant's alive—"

"We'll stay here till mornin' anyways," said the Kid. "We'll need a big batch o' proof. Mebbe Gant will come out o' the mountains alone: if he does, well, wait an' see if he does!"

CHAPTER III

AT DAWN the campers in the hollow under the Soldados were astir. They did not have to go far for water; Earp had a two-gallon keg slung under the wagon. The Kid risked building a tiny fire of the driest brush he could find and June got out the coffee pot and frying pan. While the girl was getting the breakfast, the Kid walked over to the prisoner who was hatless and sitting on the ground with his back against a rear wheel of the wagon, to which he was tied.

"Lo, Brazos," the Kid greeted the gaudy figure. "How's all the Rio trimmin's this mornin'? Say, boy, I got some questions to ask you after we've e't. You heard us talkin' last—"

"Try 'n' get me to tell you anything!" growled the rustler, fixing the cowpuncher with an evil stare.

"I will," nodded the Kid, "an' if I don't make out the first time, I'll try ag'in. That's me, a tryin' hombre."

"Hey, Kid," called Earp from the other side of the wagon, "you want your hoss unsaddled? I never thought o' doin' it last night an' the pore critter—"

"Never thought of it myself, by golly!" the Kid exclaimed. "Sure I

want the leather off him. I'll do it, Earp." He left Brazos and hurried around the end of the wagon.

Earp was watering the picketed horses from a bucket. The Kid affectionately greeted the JG roan, which whickered and nuzzled him as he stripped away the gear.

"Come and get it," came from June, over by the fire.

"That's me!" chuckled Earp, hugely sniffing the fragrant coffee smell. "In just a minute."

The Kid swung his saddle on his shoulder and retraced his steps to the wagon. He was a couple of paces from it when Brazos Slayden, entirely free of bonds, sprang around the end of the vehicle, swinging a nine-inch bowie. The Kid was taken by surprise, of course. He couldn't readily get at his gun because it hung on his right hip and the heavy saddle gear was weighting his right shoulder. Before he could drop the saddle and draw, Brazo's knife would be exploring his vitals. From the ugly gleam of triumph in his eyes, the waddy knew his advantage. He crouched for a leap that would carry him to the Kid's side as the latter paused, his knife arm held low against his leg for an upward thrust at the abdomen.

"Greaser to the core, huh, Brazos!" exclaimed the Kid, and with the words, as Slayden launched his body, hurled the saddle which he was gripping by the horn. The forty-pound gear of leather, wood and steel smashed into the waddy as his feet left the ground, and Slayden fell, flat on his back. The Kid figured on him being a trifle stunned from the solid impact as he jumped forward, but Brazos Slayden wasn't. He was of tough fibre. He still gripped the knife-handle and, scrambling up, throwing the saddle off his chest, was already rising from his knees when the Kid forked him, horsewise, and crushed him

down. Nothing would have been easier than for McCord to draw and shoot, but he had use for Brazos alive. Yet, striving to save the waddy for a future grilling, the Kid cheated his own purpose. His sudden, forceful landing on Slayden's back drove the waddy down on the blade of his knife—his choking cry appraised the Kid of what had occurred. Instantly McCord pulled to his feet and turned the man over. But too late; the bowie had bitten in up to the handle, right over the heart.

EARP came running. And June! They knew, from sight of the still, prostrate form and the Kid's crestfallen attitude, standing over it, that death had visited the camp in the hollow. But they thought the Kid had killed the prisoner.

"Thought you wanted to ask him things—or couldn't you help givin' him his come-up-with?" Thus spoke Earp, while his daughter stood with pale cheeks, looking down.

"Accident, tough luck," replied the chagrined cowboy. "When I jumped an' smashed him down, his bowie must've been pointin' up. Didn't you search him, Earp, or is that your knife?"

"Nope. An' I sure searched him."

"His boots?"

"Nope!" Earp looked sheepish. "That's where he packed it, o' course. Hell! Now how'd you reckon he got loose?"

The Kid stepped around to the wheel to which Slayden had been trussed. He pointed as Earp and June followed, to a bandanna with two loops in it, on the ground, a sash cut in several pieces, and a slashed rope, the last having been passed around the late prisoner's chest and through the spokes of the wheel.

"There's your explanation," said the Kid. "Worked his hands out o' the

bandanna, dug the knife outa his boot an' used it on the sash an' rope. Bet he had his hands free when I was talkin' to him. Well, we'll have to do without him."

They ate breakfast, though June's appetite suffered somewhat from the knifing incident, and the Kid and Earp buried the man they knew as "Brazos."

About half an hour afterwards they heard hoofbeats out on the plain and the two men crept up over the rim of the hollow and, through the screening brush, peered out.

"McKell!" the Kid exclaimed and Earp echoed him gutturally, for at the head of the five riders swinging across the level, evidently following a trail by the frequent glances cast groundward, rode the lithe-figured, iron gray sheriff from Fairchance.

What had brought the posse to the foot of the Soldado Mountains was not a hard guess for the Kid, though Ezra Earp opened bearded lips to question.

"What—" he began, then the Kid laid a hand on his arm.

"Listen!" he hissed. "McKell hol-lerin'."

The posse had stopped suddenly and wrathfully the sheriff's voice was raised, the while he shook a clenched fist. "Just like always! The trail goes on into the Soldados. Your cows, Barton, is lost just like everybody's else's. Can't get 'em back 'nless the gov'ment will lend us a regiment an' a couple machine guns."

"Well, what the hell!" bawled Barton, the ranchman who had owned the four hundred steers, pushing his horse up beside the sheriff's "No other way, Mac, 'nless we could catch some of 'em outside."

"That's right enough," boomed McKell. "I'd stake my hope to reelection next fall that lots o' the gangs in them mount'ns come to Fairchance an' mingle with us, drink with us, play

cards, but—if we dunno who they are, how can we lay 'em by the heels?"

"You can't," agreed Barton. "Well, goodbye, cows," he flapped a disgusted hand at the pass before them.

The impulse to break cover and inform the posse of the identity of at least one of the badmen of the Soldados seized Earp and McCord simultaneously, for they turned and stared at each other questioningly.

"We're fugitives our own selves," said the Kid slowly. "I reckon we'd better not chance it."

"I reckon not," agreed Earp, and sank back.

SO THEY remained silent and hidden from sight while the posse riders turned about and hit the back trail, slowly and in savage humor.

"It's funny," said the Kid, as he and Earp dropped down into the hollow again, "that McKell don't think o' hidin' a bunch of men near the pass an' watch for outlaws to go in or out—like we're doin'."

"You oughta be sheriff," Earp declared. "You shore got more head than the one in office, though Mac's a good enough feller if you ain't done nothin'."

Near noon, when they were beginning to think of food again, men's voices and the measured click-click of loping horses on rock, drew the Kid and Earp up into the brush again.

"If that's Gant," hissed the Kid, as they hustled to the edge of the brush, "he ain't alone. If the odds—" He forgot to finish, for his eyes were doing duty now and what he saw scuttled his hopes.

The pass was spewing horsemen, two and two abreast, and continued until six had loped forth. One of the van riders, on the side nearest the hollow, caused McCord and Earp to face each other an instant.

"That's the man I hung," said the Kid, a half humorous twist to his mouth.

"It's the kiote I shot," said Earp, his brow wrinkled.

Then they turned to look again. The six rustlers, taking their time, pointed away from the mountains over the trail recently traveled by the disappointed posse.

"Hitch up your team, Earp," the Kid cried, sliding backward. "We can't cut him out while he's with his gang, but mebbe if we foller, we'll catch him by his lonesome. Betcha they're ridin' to town."

CHAPTER IV

THE Kid's words were prophetic. To Fairchance, cow town, the Earp-McCord party trailed Joe Gant and his riders, June on the wagon box with her father and the Kid astride the roan on the right. The Kid set the pace, one that kept them well in the rear of the rustlers, whom they glimpsed only once or twice ahead. For that matter the wagon, loaded with all the personal and household belongings that Earp could cram into it, along with provisions, could not have made the trip much faster even had it been necessary or desirable. Earp had anticipated being absent from his ranch home a long, long time and had taken everything he could lug or lay his hands on quickly.

They approached Fairchance up a long draw, the town was located on the edge of the hills. The Kid suggested a plan of action en route and Earp, having no better to offer and agreeing to all particulars, the cowboy left them at the head of the draw and paced smartly townward alone. He kept a wary eye out for the sheriff while seek-

ing the mounts of the sextette along the hitch rails that fronted the two saloons and several stores of Fairchance. Thought it most likely the saloon racks were where he would find them—and he was correct. "The Howling Coyote" got the rustler trade, for there were the broncs, switching flies, a buckskin, a bay, a pinto, two sorrels and—where was the dun? Joe Gant had been riding a dun and it was not there, strung along with the rest.

"He turned off the trail somewheres," the Kid decided as he jogged over to the Howling Coyote. "Last time I seen 'em was half a mile from town an' all was together. Like's not Gant went around to his ranch. Now, le's see. These five jiggers come first."

How to capture them, single-handed? The Kid was a fair revolver shot, but had never had much practice on human targets; rattlers, horned toads, rocks, even whiskey bottles had served as such while he was trying to attain speed and accuracy. It was in the use of the riata that he excelled, not only at work but at play, rodeos, stampedes and roundups. He could make his rawhide riata talk. His glance now fell on the neat coil in the tie-straps and brightened. Just the weapon to use, more effective than a pair of shooting irons in his hands! But, how was he going to get the enemy bunched so that a single throw would do the trick? If he missed one, that one would be enough to put a hole in him and jack up the game. He couldn't just walk into the barroom and chuck a loop at them, even if they were the only customers at the bar, which the five horses at the hitchrack seemed to indicate, for he would be seen and they would have ample time to dodge, one or more anyway. His wandering gaze returned to the five broncs and down from the saddle he swung, smiling. He had seen nothing of the sheriff and at this blazing hot hour, Fairchancers

were taking more or less of a siesta, which cleared the stage for the Kid's act.

He first untied his rawhide, slipped it over his arm, went up on the stoop and walking beside the hitchrack, deftly pulled loose the knotted reins of all five cayuses. Then he spread a wide noose, jerked his gun and fired, close to the head of the nearest untied horse, which was out of range of the doorway. The animal reared at the sudden blast so close to its ears and plunged away from the rack with a snort of fright, the four others, hardly less startled, dragging reins in its dust. The Kid had slapped the gun back in his holster the instant after he fired and, standing about five paces from the open door of the saloon, was whirling the huge loop. He heard curses and a stampede of jingling feet, and as the five rustlers squeezed pellmell through the doorway, the big noose sang out and dropped, encircling them. The Kid braced back, digging high heels into the boards of the stoop. He had practically duplicated a stunt that had won him applause and a trophy at more than one "Frontier Day" exhibition, the roping of five horsemen at one throw.

"Whoa, buckaroos!" he yelled, as the men began to struggle against the rawhide, trying to get their guns out. The Kid pulled his own to quiet them. "The first jigger—" he began.

"What's to pay, Kid McCord?" demanded a gruff voice, not far away.

THE Kid flashed a look. The sheriff unnoticed, had ridden up, was sitting his horse by the stoop and regarding the scene with a wondering eye. He gave the Kid a baleful look, the cattle thief from the JG who had outwitted McKell, made him laughing stock almost.

"I'd tell a man!" whooped the Kid.

"Mac, you're just the hombre I want to see. I'm catchin' these buckos as a present for you. Hold your guns on 'em, will you, an' I'll frisk their hardware. It's straight goods, Mac, they're rustlers, hot out o' the Soldados!"

He spoke so earnestly the sheriff was compelled to believe him, and the fact that the peace officer didn't know the faces of the five—hard faces enough—added weight in the Kid's favor. McKell pulled his shooters as he swung out of the saddle to the stoop.

"But you're a cattle stealer yourself, McCord," he growled, edging up to the five roped men, furtive-eyed when they saw his guns lining them. "Turnin' on your pals?"

"Not any," shortly retorted the Kid, jingling close to the captives and whipping off the rawhide. He fell to lifting irons from holsters right and left, pushing the low-cursing men apart when they unconsciously hung together, paralyzed to find themselves in such a fix.

"There!" said the Kid, heaping the guns with a triumphant gesture at the feet of the sheriff. "All yours, Mac, the guns an' the owners. I was hidin' out near the Soldado Pass 's mornin' when you come along trailin' Barton's cattle. I heard you ravin', you an' Barton, an' you said you bet the waddies come into town an' played around right under your nose, but not knowin' who they was, you couldn't nab 'em. Well, I waited there near the pass an' these fellers come out—an' one other—an' I follered 'em. They're some o' the gang that stole Barton's cattle an' who do you think's the leader? Ten guesses you wouldn't guess it, so I'll tell you—Joe Gant! So hangin' him didn't work—an' I'm glad you can wipe that off my record. An' I'll prove, before I'm through, Mac, that Gant changed hosses with me on the range yesterday an' that I'm no cow thief!"

"What's that you said about hangin' Gant?" The sheriff was evidently mystified, but did not let it interfere with his vigilance over the rustler crew, and the rustlers knew it and were passive as sheepherders.

"Well, I tried to hang him for the dirt he done me, but—" The Kid paused. He saw the sheriff had no idea what he was talking about, proving that Gant had said nothing regarding the lynching that patently had failed. The Kid might tell McKell later, might not, but just now he had other pressing business elsewhere.

"Where *is* Gant if he was with these fellers?" asked the sheriff, thinking something queer about the way the cowboy had choked off.

"Out to his ranch, I reckon," replied the Kid, busy coiling his rawhide. "An' that's where I'm goin', Mac, to get him an' bring him back to you—alive! I'd tell a man I am!"

And before McKell could remonstrate—if he would—the lithe figure was in the saddle and galloping away, bent over and fastening the faithful rope in its proper place on the saddle.

THE Kid raced back to the draw where he had left the Earps and after a few hurried words rode out again, with the covered wagon creaking after him. He might have ascertained without question the direction taken by Joe Gant when he cast loose from his five men had he cared to backtrack. But the Kid didn't want to waste the time. He was eager to corner Gant and would have bet anything he owned that the renegade ranchman had returned to the JG. It would be about time for him to turn up there, else his foreman and punchers, whom the Kid was sure were ignorant of their employer's dual character, would wax suspicions; unless they were accustomed to him staying away for long periods on some lying

pretext. Maybe they were. The Kid hoped, as he rode, with the wagon rattling close behind, that the JG cowboys would not be around headquarters; if they were and he couldn't convince them of Joe Gant's crookedness, there'd be a tangle. But Earp was along, Earp who had shot Gant and apparently missed, and June on whom Gant had laid hands. The punchers would believe the girl!

But his fears were groundless, he discovered on arriving. Scouting ahead of the wagon, he left his horse by the cottonwood, where he had tried to swing Gant into eternity, and stole toward the ranch-house. He heard voices, very similar voices, so much alike in fact, that before he peered around the door, which stood open, he got the idea that Joe Gant was talking loudly and angrily to himself. The Kid was looking into the office which was occupied by two men: one sitting—to be exact, tied down in a chair—the other standing, facing the evident prisoner. The profiles of both were toward the Kid and their likeness was so remarkable that, but for the fact that the man standing was dusty from hat to boots, McCord would as readily have picked the prisoner for Joe Gant. Yet the prisoner was now addressing "Joe" as "Jim."

"If you've set your mind on killin' me, Jim, you'll do it, so there's no use me makin' a holler. In all your devilment, stealin' from me as quick as you would from others since you come down from Zuni County, I've stood by you as I thought a brother oughta. Seems now I'd done better if I'd given you up to the sheriff."

"Well, mebbe," grunted the other. "But he prett' near had me yesterday, an' if that puncher, McCord's roan hadn't been handy to swap the grey for, I'd been caught, shore. An' say, Joe, I think McCord's hidin' in the

Soldados since he thinks he broke your neck." And he told of the pseudo-Brazos in the mountain camp the previous night and of the unknown's clever getaway.

"Must've been him. Damn' shame. He was a good feller an' a top rope," remarked the tied man. "You're shore got a lotta hell on your shoulders, Jim."

"Botherin' me, too, it is." Jim vented a nasty laugh, then wheeled at the sound of a tinkling step on the threshold.

Kid McCord had taken his rope from the saddle when he left it, meaning to take "Joe" Gant alive if it were at all possible. The rawhide began to get busy on the person of the standing man, manipulated by a master hand. His movement toward his belt-holster was arrested by the swoop of the noose, jerking tight about his arms and holding them immovable. The rawhide rippled and Jim Gant's bull neck was caught in a half-hitch. Ripping again and yet again, each time noosing a wrist of Gant, the lively rope drew his hands together. The Kid now stood but ten feet from Gant, holding what was left of the forty feet of rawhide and grinning widely.

"I reckon that'll do," said the Kid, while the man in the chair muttered admiration of the feat.

"I'm chokin' to death!" snarled the Kid's prisoner.

"Good thing if he was, but he ain't," remarked the man in the chair. "But he will sometime."

"Who're you?" demanded McCord, looking over at him.

"Joe Gant, your employer, Kid."

"An' who's this?" the Kid turned a thumb at the other man.

"Jim Gant, my twin brother an' a bad egg," declared Joe Gant. "Kid there's been a lot o' trouble account of us lookin' alike an'—"

"WAIT a minute," the Kid interrupted, and he turned to go to the door. "Oh, there you are. Come in, folks," he called as Earp and his daughter came up the porch steps; and as they entered the office of the JG, wide-eyed at the scene, and particularly the two editions of Gant, the Kid requested June, "Look 'em both over careful, will you, an' tell me which one was chasin' after you."

June stepped slowly forward and regarded each of the men in turn, silently and intently. It was a difficult question to decide, but her woman's intuition aided her.

"This man," she pointed at Jim Gant, standing sullenly, "is the one, Kid. You'd hardly notice it, unless you look close, real close, but there's a *little* difference—the eyes mostly."

"Is he the man you shot, too, Earp?" said the Kid, turning to the old man, whose jaw was hanging down.

"Damned if I know!" replied Earp, his gaze roving from Joe to Jim, and back again.

"You bet he shot me!" snarled Jim suddenly. "An' my watch saved me. Shock o' the bullet knocked me down an' the watch was junk afterward."

"So *that's* the reason!" exclaimed the Kid, and Earp echoed him. "Old timer, you shot *at* the right one after all."

"Was he pesterin' 'round you, Miss Earp?" asked Joe Gant from the chair he couldn't leave; and at her nod, he continued, "Well, that's like him. He always was a hotcake with the women. Called himself 'Joe' Gant, I s'pose, makin' out to be me because he couldn't appear as his real self, bein' a no-'count thief an' a citizen o' the Soldados. Folks, I can explain things that's no doubt been puzzlin' you a heap."

"I heard you talkin' when I come to the door," said the Kid. "Before that I thought there was only *one* Gant

—you, Mr. Joe. An' all the time you was straight an' your brother was doin' things that you got blamed for. Was he goin' to kill you? Seems like—"

"Yes," said Joe Gant, "he was, after I'd shielded him for months an' stood for him stealin' from me to boot. Kid, you tried to lynch the wrong man. Bet you've been racking your brains over that. It was Jim the sheriff chased yesterday, an' he swapped horses with you while you was down on the Forty Mile bank, snakin' that calf out. Then he rode in a circle an' come up around the buttes while the sheriff was talkin' to you. He's told me about it. When you come to the ranch afterward an' jumped me, I didn't sabe what the hell was wrong, but you wouldn't listen an' you was like a tiger. No wonder! But my neck's pretty thick an' tough—an' Jim's, too, an' I reckon McKell will be testin' it soon—an' the limb' o' the cottonwood you hung me on *broke* just after you'd rode off. That's what saved me. Jim came along right after it broke an' carried me into the house. Thought I was near gone an' hoped so, an' put me in the cellar to finish it. But I didn't die, as you see. Jim was still here when Earp came over to gun him for annoyin' his daughter, an' that's the how o' that."

"Remarkable!" exploded old Ezra "I'm a free man ag'in!"

June, who had stepped back to her father's side, hugged his arm in ecstasy.

"Why," said the Kid, "did Jim want to kill you, Mr. Joe, when you hadn't give him away? Hanker to get hold of the ranch an' all?"

"Yep. It's a good payin' ranch, as you know, an' he was tired o' livin' just a jump or two ahead o' the sheriff."

"Well, he won't have to do but one more dance an' that'll be on air,"

grunted the Kid ominously and facing scowling Jim Gant, Soldado citizen. "An' I left the five other hombres he quit the mountains with, with McKell at Fairchance."

"Say," burst out Jim, "was you the feller wearin' Brazos Slayden's Mex hat that got away from our camp?"

"SURE was. Me 'n the Earps was in the mountains hidin', an' your Brazos got too friendly an' I knocked him out an' joined your outfit that was drivin' Barton's cattle."

"Where's Brazos at?"

"Oh," said the Kid with a grin, "he got tangled up with his own knife. He's buried in a holler, foot o' the Soldados. C'mon, James, you an' me will go see the sheriff. Where's your dun hoss?"

"Will somebody oblige by cuttin' me loose?" requested Joe Gant, with a laugh.

Earp stepped quickly to his side and began to work on the knots. "Jim had about decided to sift a bullet under my skin, Kid, seein' I didn't die from the bite o' your rope—or rather the bite o' *my* rope."

"Say, I'm plumb sorry 'bout that. But you know it was a mistake, Mr. Gant." The Kid was contrite.

"Sure, I know," replied Joe Gant, as he rose unsteadily, assisted by Earp. "Go ahead, Kid, take that misfit out o' my sight. An' when you come back from Fairchance, you can start right in ridin' ag'in."

The Kid did not immediately answer. He turned to catch June Earp's gaze, full of promise, upon him. The blood pounded in his temples.

"Well, thanks—mebbe, Mr. Gant," he stammered. "It's mighty likely that I'll go over to Earp's ranch, though."



The Kid From Damnation Valley

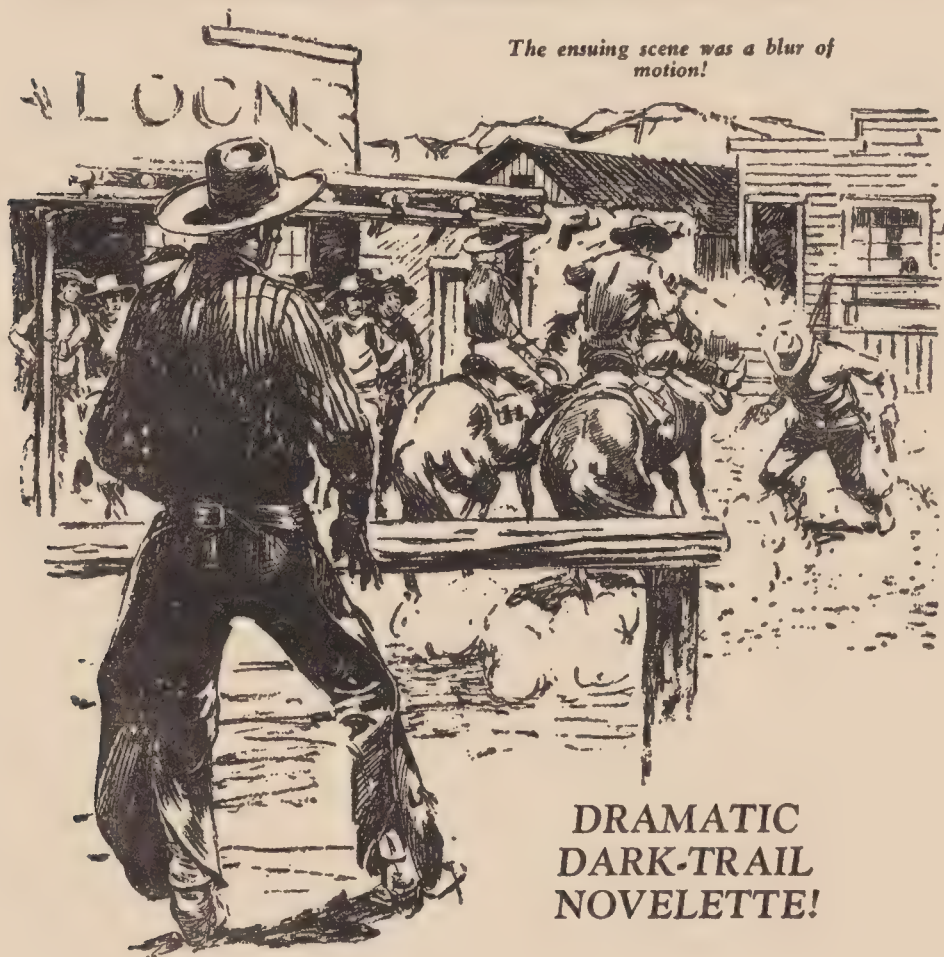
By

JAMES P. OLSEN

Author of "Guns Up, Range-Hog, It's the Kansas Kid!" etc.

Satan King ramrodded seven salty, wanted men when he rode out of Damnation Valley, and the seven or Satan would fog back through powder-smoke finally but not both!

The ensuing scene was a blur of motion!



**DRAMATIC
DARK-TRAIL
NOVELETTE!**

CHAPTER I

WOLVES AT WAR

THE OUTLAWS, watching Buck Honor as he patted the last piece of sod down on the grave, weren't thinking of the dead. They were won-

dering, now that Estelle King was gone, how long it would take Rom King to get at the throat of his quiet twin brother, Rem.

Old Honor stood up. He swallowed a lump in his throat and growled, "Reckon poor 'Stelle's better off. It wasn't much of a life she led after Satan was kilt." He glared at Rem, and added

harshly, "An' after *you* had to be born!"

Rom, thumbs hooked over his cart-ridge belt, regarded Rem maliciously, his grief for his mother secondary to a feeling of vicious joy. Estelle's death left Rom free to unbridle the hatred he held for Rem. Rom moved belligerently, but Honor's, "Not here," stayed him, postponing the inevitable clash. Turning, Rom led the men down the slope toward Owlhoot House.

Big Mitch had watched this graveside scene with interest. Now, the big outlaw, disliked and mistrusted by all save Rom, had a wicked smile on his lips as he followed the others. Big Mitch looked like a cat with a fat canary in view.

Alone, Rem King knelt beside the grave. He was glad death had come to his mother in her sleep, and easily. Life hadn't been any too good to Estelle King, he realized. Rom and he had been born the same day Estelle got word of her wild, handsome husband's death. Satan King had ramrodded seven salty, wanted men when he rode out of Damnation Valley to rob the Sageburg bank. Of their number, only Big Mitch, Buck Honor, and an outlaw doctor called Pill had returned.

Pill did all he could, and saved Estelle's life. But the shock, grief, ordeal of bearing twins was too much for the girl. After that, the mental pattern of her life became a crazy-quilt; she was subject to bad "spells."

Well, that episode in life was done with. Rem rose, and slowly, regretfully walked down toward Owlhoot House, a long, log building beside Ripple River. Conversation ceased when he entered the big main room. Rom turned from the counter that served as a bar, a wicked, wild expression on his dark, heavy face.

"Been waitin' on you, so I could give orders," he sneered. "Them I don't pick for my personal bunch, start payin'

double for supplies, likker, bunks an' cabins. Startin' with Honor an' Big Mitch, I'm buildin' a crew to go down an' bust the skunks that murdered *my* ol' man. I aim to rob the bank, an' fill the whole of Damnation Valley with their beef!

"I'd done this before, hadn't been for Estelle; same as I'd stomped out your guts a long time ago, hadn't been she throwed real bad spells ever' time I even looked cross-eyed at you."

Rem stood quietly, tall, slender, with brown hair and eyes in marked contrast with Rom's glowering darkness and heavier body. There was little similarity to mark them as brothers, much less as twins. All that had been mean and vicious in Satan King, nothing that had been good, had been passed on to Rom.

"Damn you, say somethin'!" Rem's controlled attitude enraged Rom, as it always did. "You afraid to talk?"

"No. I ain't afraid of you, an' the fact gripes you," Rem told him. "Your consideration for Estelle was one decent thing in your favor, Rom. What should I say about your plans?"

"This place is as much mine as yours —"

"Like hell it is!" Rom barked. "I'm the first-born by two hours. I'm Satan's crown prince, an' don't you forget it. Why, damn you, if you hadn't been born, Estelle might not've been so childish, an' all, like she was."

"Yeah, you're Satan's crown prince, all right," Rem admitted. He didn't waste time pointing out how unreasonable it was to blame him for Estelle's condition. Pill had said Estelle *might* not have been mentally unbalanced if twins hadn't arrived the same time as the news of Satan's death.

HONOR had worshipped Satan and the wild, outlaw bravery the name of King stood for. He'd loved Estelle

merely because she became Satan's wife, and then the mother of Satan's first-born—the crown prince. He gave all his dislike to Rem, the second-born, because of Estelle, and because Rem was as unlike Satan had been as Rom was like him.

"You know how I feel," Rem went on. "The people around the town of Sageburg ain't murderers. They was only protectin' what belonged to them from men come to steal it."

"Hell," Honor groaned. "A fine pass when a King stands up for his daddy's killers. You ain't no king, Rem, an' it's a good thing Rom's ready to carry on, an' make the name feared again."

"It would be better if the name of King was carried on to be knowed as law-abidin' an' respected," Rem said. "An' that's what I aim to try an' do."

"So the name ain't respected?" Rom yelled, working himself into a furious frame. "You wouldn't talk like that if you had on a gun. You—"

"I didn't feel called on to pack an iron to the burial."

"It's over with, ain't it? Go get your cutter, you salve-mouthed dogie. This Valley won't hold both of us. Go get your gun, an' I'll fix it so we can both stay here. You savvy?"

"I do." Rem nodded. "An' I ain't sure it'd be me buried up beside Estelle. But I ain't Cain—or Romulus. I won't gunfight you."

"Will you give me a chance to bust your neck with my bare fists, then?" Rom raged. "Will you, you yaller pup?"

"Shuck your gun," Rem said levelly, and peeled off his shirt.

Tables and benches were pushed back and men shouldered the walls. There was no talk, no bets were made. Not an outlaw there but sensed that Death's will was omnipresent in the room. And Rom King was living personification of Cain, and his namesake, Romulus. Brother-slayers, both.

Stripped to the waist, Rom's torso showed thicker, more muscular than Rem's. He was a cutlass, and Rem a rapier type. Rem stood straight, hands as his sides. Rom crouched and started slowly toward him.

"Anything goes," he snarled, and leaped.

His charge seemed to halt against a stone wall. Rem's right fist came up from his hip and crashed against Rom's jaw. It put him to his haunches. It would have been fair for Rem to have kicked Rom while he was down. He stepped back. Save for a diamond brilliance in his eyes, his expression did not change.

Rom was damnably silent as he came up. He charged Rem, stopped, swung the toe of his boot into Rem's stomach. Rem gasped, grabbed Rom's ankle, twisted and dumped him to the floor again. He jumped astraddle of his back, wound his fingers in Rom's hair and banged his head against the floor. Rom shrieked an oath and rose with Rem on his back, and hurled himself on over with Rem under him.

They came to their feet, stood toe-to-toe and slugged. Blood smeared their faces, their ears. It was Rom who finally gave ground. He grabbed a bench and swung it. Rem ducked under, and it shattered against the floor. Rom raised his knee and drove it against Rem's chin. Rem spun and dropped backward. Rom, teeth barred, gleaming scallops in a bloody mask, panted as he leaped into the air and tried to drive his high heels into Rem's kidneys. Rem rolled. One heel ripped the hide down his left ribs. Rom dropped on top of him, got his thick fingers around Rem's throat and blue-green lights flashed in Rem's head.

He fumbled, found Rom's throat with his own fingers and clamped down. The wheeze of their attempted breathing was the only sound in the room. Rom

toppled sideways, thumping the floor. Neither of them let go the other's throat. They squirmed, kicked, rolled over and over and over, tried to surge to their feet and fell apart. Rom went to his hands and knees; Rem swayed perilously, but he had the bitter will to remain on his feet.

"Here, Rom!" Big Mitch hissed, and the knife he tossed down clattered to the floor within Rom's reach.

Buck Honor's gun slithered from the holster. "Mitch, keep outta King business," he warned. "There's only one reason I even stand for you comin' to Owlhoot House. Don't press your luck."

"The hell with you. I don't see you grabbin' the knife," Big Mitch snarled.

"An' cross Rom? Get him on the peck at me, him thinkin' I was sidin' Rem? That was your idea, wasn't it Mitch, you son—"

ROM had grabbed up the knife. He leaped to his feet and the murderous blade flashed downward. Rem swayed aside, the blade's point leaving a sudden, bloody thread down one arm. Rom's body followed the drop of the knife, pulling off balance. Rem raised on his toes, locked his fingers together and brought both hands down on the back of his brother's neck.

Rom flattened out, groaning, unable to rise. He was partially paralyzed by the effects of the rabbit-punch. Chest heaving, blood smearing him, Rem staggered and leaned against the counter.

Rom, at last, rolled over and tried to stand. His knees gave under him and he sat down. He squinted hellishly at Rem, his eyes swelling nearly shut because of his broken nose.

"I'll kill you for this," he ground out. "No difference where you go, I'll find you an' let my lead into your guts—even if I got to hunt you to hell an' back to these Desertion Mountains!"

Big Mitch's shoulders humped as Rem answered Rom's sworn intentions. The outlaw's fingers made claws close to his gun butts. The Colt in Honor's fist, Honor's dislike, his warning to Big Mitch to stay out of King business, stayed the outlaw's move.

Rem said: "You won't have to hunt so far, Rom. God forbid I ever have to bend a gun on my own brother to protect myself. But if you go on with this idea of raidin' Sageburg, dirtyin' up the name of King some more while I'm tryin' to scrub it clean, you'll see that I'm easy enough to find!"

CHAPTER II

TRIPLED TROUBLES

SAWTOOTHED ramparts of the Desertions were a blur in the blue haze far back of Rem King. The immediate range was broken, semi-badland. The country needed a slew of wet weather, too.

Rem reined off the narrow ribbon of dusty road and went down a draw toward a board-'n-batten house, a few head of cattle bearing several different brands moving out of his path. He found the house had been deserted a long time. The outbuildings were falling into ruin, the lot pond surface was sunbaked mud, cracked and curling. Rem stopped in the short shade west of the house and made a cigarette. He was lighting it when a girl rode around the corner of the place.

Rem straightened, regarding her with the somber respect of the man whose acquaintance with girls had been scanty. She seemed a friendly little person, with a freckle-speckled nose, bronzed hair tucked under a man's J. B. and a generous mouth. Rem's owlish wary attitude caused her to smile.

"Why, hello, there," she greeted. "I was riding from Asia Lane's, and cut into the road behind you. But you wouldn't know Asia. You're a stranger, else you wouldn't have come here for water, or food. I followed you to tell you, there's water in a hole down there in Crow Creek."

She raised her arm, a quirt dangling from her wrist, and pointed to a distant line of cottonwood trees and bank willows. Unversed in the proprieties, all Rem knew to do was thank her and start for the creek. The girl put her horse in motion beside his. She was without artifice. Her act was a neighborly one, he knew.

"This's the old Naslet place," she said, just to make talk. "The bank at Sageburg was robbed, more than twenty years ago. The small outfits like Naslet, Lane, Gordons and Rep Jones never have gotten back on their feet. But Naslet was the only one to leave."

Rem stared straight ahead, cursing a blow that laid men on their backs for such a time. "Seems like," he said aloud, "they've had time to build back again."

"Hard luck follows bad. There was blackleg and drouth. And," her voice lowered regretfully, "other drawbacks, too."

She changed what seemed a painful subject, saying, "But I imagine you're more interested in a job? The pool of small outfits can't hire riders. Old Jack Hargish, of JH Connected, needs hands, but can't always meet his payroll. Gurt Kruss, of Bar 13, might put you on. I could speak to—"

Before the girl could finish, trouble took to them with stomach-emptying abruptness. A rifle rang flatly from somewhere along the creek ahead. The bullet sounded like a gigantic wasp passing well above them. That shot, Rem knew, had been a warning. Another one might not be,

"Come on!" Rem cried. "He can easy see us out in the open." He ran his horse ahead of the girl, toward the creekside timber. As he reached the dry, rocky creekbed, a rider dashed off of a liveoak flat beyond. Rem glimpsed a fluttering yellow neckerchief and a big white hat as the man disappeared around a point of brush.

"Did you see him?" The girl didn't seem frightened, only worried as she reined up beside Rem. He gave her a sidewise look. He had a hunch she'd also glimpsed the man, and probably knew him.

"Barely glimpsed him," Rem told her. "But it's plain why he tried to scare us back." He rode across the creek and looked down at a cow on the ground beneath a liveoak. She'd been looped by a foreleg, pitchpoled, her neck broken. Rem turned his gaze to smoke coming through dust hastily kicked over a small fire. A calf came out of the brush. It bawled of pain of the Leaning LX brand just burned on its flank as it nosed the cow. The dead animal bore old Jock Hargish's JH Connected brand!

Rem lifted his gaze inquiringly. The girl had a harsh, lost expression on her face. "The brand on the calf, Leaning LX, is Asia Lane's," she choked. "Asia's in town today. Makes no difference, because I know he didn't do this. No other pool man did, either."

"If you know who did it, all you got to do is tell who," Rem advised.

"You don't understand," she muttered. "There's been so much trouble—and now, this. I was just thinking. I don't believe it would be a good idea for you to strike Gurt Kruss for a job. Couldn't you just ride on, and forget what you see here?"

"I can keep still about this," he tentatively agreed. "But how about them?" He nodded at the dead cow and the mavericked calf. For answer,

she extended one hand, saying, "Give me your knife."

WHY he acted as he did, Rem couldn't say. He did know it was kicking dynamite around—especially for a son of Satan King.

"I'll cut the brand off the cow," he said, getting down. "You haze the calf back into the brush." He opened his knife and set to work. He straightened, with a square of bloody hide in hand.

"Just toss 'er up to me, an' keep your hands still." The chill words, spoken from the willows behind Rem, were accompanied by the tap of a gunbarrel on a saddlehorn.

The girl cried, "Jock Hargish!" as she wheeled her horse. Rem turned slowly, staring at the lined, bitter face of the gray-haired man. Hargish seemed perplexed, let down as he glanced at the girl. His eyes glinted evilly when he looked back at Rem.

"The sound of the shot that killed my cow brought me here," Hargish growled. "You're a stranger, didn't know how sound carries around here. I never thought the pool'd got to the point they'd call in a thing as low as a cow-killing' mavericker!"

He sighed and said to the girl, "Miss Kay, it just don't seem you could be mixed up in anything like this."

"I'm not mixed up in anything," she answered. "I was showing this stranger the way to the waterhole when that shot was taken at us to warn us back. I'm positive no pool man did this, and to keep down trouble, I asked this man to cut out that brand."

"You'd go a long way to stop trouble, Miss Kay," Hargish admitted. "Reckon, though, I'll just take that hunk of hide an' this jasper, here, on to Lane's, an' have a li'l talk."

"Asia's in town," she said. "As for this man—Why, I don't even know his name!"

"Who are you, feller?" Hargish motioned with his cocked gun.

Rem steeled himself, groaning inwardly. "My name's King."

"King!" Hargish snarled. "The same name as the black devil that robbed the bank that time. I hear he sired a couple of whelps that was, aptly 'nough, called Romulus an' Remus, an' sure was bein' raised up by wolves. King! Bigod, you couldn't be—"

"I'm Rem King," Rem said quietly, bracing himself against the shock of a bullet from the rancher's gun. But Hargish seemed either too stunned or too enraged to command his trigger finger. It was the girl who made a move against him. She rode forward, crying, "Rem King! And I asked you for help!"

She raised the quirt that hung from her wrist, slashed him across the face, put the spurs to her horse and raced away.

Stunned, Rem raised his hand and touched the welt the quirt had caused. He looked up at Hargish, as though for explanation. Hargish motioned with his gun, snarling, "Fork your hoss. Guess you ain't guilty of this. Lane'd never hire no whelp of the wolf that wrecked this range an' give Younk Fraly control of things. Just the same, you're goin' along when I show that piece of hide to Lane. An' maybe you can explain what damn skunk's plan brought you down here."

"No skunk's plan," Rem assured him as they rode off. "I aim to live an honest life, try to make up for things charged against the name of King. I figured this was the country to do it in."

"Yeah?" Hargish jeered. "Stop lyin'. First thing, you're all mixed up in somethin' meanin' trouble."

"No," Rem denied. "But I can't understand why the girl—"

"Quirted you when she learned who you was? That's Kay Fraly, feller."

She's a fine girl, even if she is friends of the pool folks, an' the niece of Younk Fraly, at the Sagebrush bank—the skunk! Kay can't help that, though. No more than she can help it her father, Mace Fraly, was killed in that bank robbery battle in Sagebrush, seven months before li'l Kay was born!"

Rem gasped. Hargish grunted. "Kay's mama never lived long, damn you," the rancher snarled. "She's been dependent on Younk, who's goin' to see her married to Gurt Kruss, or I miss my guess."

A blue, hopeless funk possessed Rem King. Blamed for his mother's weakness, hated by Buck Honor, despised by his brother; now, blamed for a range being ruined, a girl's mother and father being dead, and that girl in some difficulties now. What would it be like, then, after Rom came down from the Deser-tions and set his guns and gun-wolves on them?

Rem was on the point of telling Jock Hargish of that danger, then withheld the words. A look at Hargish convinced Rem that a warning could serve no good purpose at the present time.

WHEN they reached Sagebrush, Hargish stopped before the bank. The squatty sandstone building still bore the bullet marks of the now historic bloody battle when the bank was robbed. The rancher nodded at an old wagon and a team in wired, patched harness.

"Asia Lane's," he grunted. "An speakin' of the devil."

Hargish motioned to Rem as he slid down and confronted a stooped man in faded, patched overalls. He raised his head and said, "Howdy, Jock," in a questioning manner.

"It's this," Hargish spat, holding out the grisly hunk of cowhide. "This outlaw whelp of Satan King, Rem King, here, cut it off of a JH cow. The calf

runnin' with her was totin' a fresh Leanin' LX brand." His gaze leaped from Lane to Rem, then back.

Lane stiffened. "A King," he croaked. "An' *you* use him to try an' tag me with your hoddam lie!" He moved one hand near the pocket of his old jumper that sagged with the weight of a gun.

Rem, looked beyond the two men, was glad that Hargish hadn't taken his smokepole away from him. A spidery, red-faced, bleached cuss stepped out of the bank. A big, small-eyed, tallow-padded man stopped in the bank doorway, nervously mouthing a cold cigar. Rem glimpsed Kay Fraly on inside the bank, then turned to Hargish.

"This Mister Lane, he ain't the man that run, down there on the creek," Rem declared.

"No?" Hargish panted. "Hell, you are in with Lane, you dirty King. You're lyin' for him. If you never done it, an' Lane never—"

Rem stared at the spidery man, who stopped with his hand on his gun, white Stetson pushed back, yellow neckerchief dangling. . . .

CHAPTER III

SKELETONS FROM HELL

SILENCE seemed to pound the street. The spidery man's right shoulder lifted, his eyelids narrowed. "You accusin' me?" he spat.

"Yeah. You accusin' Gurt Kruss?" Hargish demanded.

Now, the girl's reason for telling him to ride on and not hit Kruss for a job was plain to Rem. Plain, too, was the fact that the Bar 13 ramrod had faced this witness in order to discredit him or gun him out.

"Never knew you was Gurt Kruss, an' I ain't accused you of nothin'," Rem

stated, staring at the man. "How do you know there's anything to be accused of?" Rem softly inquired.

Kruss twitched like someone had slapped him. "You sneakin', outlaw pup," he rasped. "Who sent for you, anyhow?"

"Nobody sent for him," the man in the doorway said quickly.

"Quiet, Younk," Kruss snapped. "I'm askin' him. Outlaw, did you come on your own, or did somebody call you, to cause trouble by sayin' I done somethin'? Damn you, answer me!"

"Hold on," Hargish inserted. "Kruss, it's funny you'd yap about bein' accused, when you wasn't told nothin', or pointed out. There's too many cats hoppin' around. This King rubbish, you, an' Lane, I mean. I figger I can settle this. Miss Kay, you was with King. If *he* saw Kruss, *you* must've, too. I don't figger you'll lie. Was Kruss the man? Or is this outlaw lyin' in his teeth?"

"Kay saw nothin'," Younk Fraly said, holding the doorway.

"Younk, I'm not askin' you!" Hargish almost yelled. "Kay?"

Everyone stared past Younk Fraly at his niece. Rem's nerves tightened, his stomach crawled. He sensed that Younk and Kruss were close. Kay Fraly wouldn't turn against her uncle or the man she was, according to Hargish, apt to marry. She wouldn't side one of the tribe that had caused her father's death—a man with the welt of her quirt still livid across his face.

These men would turn on Rem, possibly thinking he'd done the branding job for trouble-stirring purposes of his own. Rem perceived he was headed toward hell, riding Hobson's choice.

Color left Kay Fraly's face. Rem felt sorry for her, and his expression showed it. Hargish was making it damned hard for Kay. She looked at her uncle, at Kruss, then at Rem. Draw-

ing a long breath, she said, "I won't answer your question, Jock."

Younk Fraly bit through his cigar. Kruss sprang backward like a mon-goose baiting a snake. "You double-crossers!" he cried as he pulled his gun, bending it on Rem, who, Kruss figured, was the swiftest of the lot.

Rem winced as Kruss's bullet ripped his ribs, his own gun leaping in his hand as the double explosion echoed along the street. Kruss had sacrificed accuracy for all out speed, and thereby made a sacrifice of everything. Rem's lead knocked an explosive breath out of the man, turned him halfway around. Kruss dropped his gun and pressed his hands to his chest. His right knee bent slowly, pulling him back around. Twisting, he fell face downward.

Rem stepped back, his wide-opened, sickness-revealing eyes shuttling to Lane, who had his hand in his jumper pocket, to Jock Hargish, who let his gun slide back into the leather under the menace of Rem's Colt. Younk Fraly had started to finger a .41 der-ringer from his vest pocket. He jerked his hand away and stepped close to his niece when Rem looked at him.

"You murdered Gurt," Fraly wheezed. "Gurt wasn't guilty."

"Kay's answer of no answer was answer he was," said Hargish. "Which don't mean I'm pattin' this outlaw on the back! What I want to know is, what'd Kruss mean by callin' out, 'Double-crossers'?"

"Hargish. Younk," the downed man gasped.

They recoiled, staring down at Kruss. The walk beneath him was stained with his blood, and blood wetted his lips. Despite the bullet in his chest, something drove him on to cling to a few more moments of life.

"Younk," Kruss gasped, hitching himself forward. "Come close. Somethin' I got—to say—to you. Come

closer, Younk."

Fraly came a step nearer. He screamed and leaped backward as Kruss reached out and scooped up his fallen shooting-iron. He rested on his left elbow and fired almost point-blank at Fraly. Fraly fell backward, his scream chopped short. His big body came down heavily. He rolled and kicked, clawing at the gaping wound in his throat. Blood pumped between his fingers as his life ran out. He tried to sit up, fell back and moved no more.

MEN and a few women along the street moved up warily. Kay gripped the doorframe and looked away, shaking her head at a woman who came toward her.

Kruss grinned redly, hellishly. "Get me a drink an' hold me up," he gurgled. "I want to talk, an' I ain't got long."

Lane raised Kruss to a sitting position against his knee. Someone else held a bottle to Kruss's lips. He looked at Rem as he gulped, then rasped, "Younk sent for you?"

"Of course not." Rem was puzzled. "Why should he?"

"Listen, all you fools. I gotta talk fast," Kruss gasped. "It started with Younk wantin' his brother's gal, Kay's mother. He wanted to squeeze the ranchers, too, an' Mace, his brother, who was over him in the bank, set down on it. Younk somehow knew a young killer named Big Mitch, an' got him to join up with Satan King an' talk up robbin' the bank down here."

Kruss paused. Lane gave him another drink. Kruss continued:

"It was a trap. Me an' two others—who happened to later be killed—was ready. Younk had gold on top of bags of iron washers; bills outside packages of paper. That was what he put in Satan's gunnysack, an' Satan thought it was cash! When I shot Satan outta his saddle, Big Mitch run to him, like

he was tryin' to save his life. We was careful not to hit Mitch. He lit out with the sack, then got his horse down in a flooded creek. He lost the sack so nobody'd know it wasn't full of money. You ranchers never knowed that. I reckon King never knew the sack didn't hold money."

"I never knew. I only know Big Mitch was tolerated because it was thought he tried to save Satan's life," Rem muttered dazedly.

"Anyhow, Younk had the bank money hisself. I had it on him, an' he made me the seemin' owner of Bar 13 when he took it from Hargish. Younk hated me, but was afraid to try anything. That's why that Big Mitch got outta several pen sentences, too: It was Younk supplied the money, secretly."

"Ahhh," Hargish groaned. "I lost Bar 13. I was a heavy holder in the bank, an' I've stripped myself these years, payin' back what I could to some of them that lost. An'—"

"An' crowdin' us li'l fellers when Younk, through Kruss, crowded you," Asia Lane pointedly reminded Hargish.

"The loan Younk pretended to get from a city bank, after he took over," Kruss said, "was the money Satan was supposed to have stolen. Younk was worried lately, afraid you fellows would come out enough he couldn't bleed you for so much interest or grab your range. He sent Big Mitch word to get a King whelp to come an' raise hell, an' had me startin' trouble to split you all so it would be easier. I heard Big Mitch aimed to work it so he'd be the big he-coon of the outlaw diggin's when this was over with."

Kruss's head jerked. "I still think—Younk sent—for you!" he gasped at Rem. His eyes rolled and he slumped away from Lane.

Stunned silence prevailed. Asia Lane cleared his throat and said, "Well, Hargish, considerin' the money you put in,

an' all you lost, reckon this puts you in the bankin' business an' gives you back Bar 13. I hope you remember how it is to be in a tight."

"I can remember—though that ain't uncrowdin' the range."

Hargish turned to Rem. "As for you," he said, "there ain't a doubt you're the devil Kruss meant. You served a good purpose you never aimed to, because things went haywire. But because of that, I'll let you off with your life. You ain't stayin' here to point the way to wholesale rustlin', killin' an' robbery, though!"

"It was my brother Kruss meant," Rem protested. "That's another reason I come here—to warn you hellfire was comin'. I—"

"Get out!" Hargish roared. "You lead a wolf pack back here, an' I'll see to you myself. I don't want any of your advice to trick me or mess me up."

Rem looked at Kay Fraly. She'd given in to grief and was sobbing pitifully, terribly. Anyhow, she wouldn't want him here. She probably blamed him for the swift turn of events that had caused her so much grief. A woman stepped up and led the girl away.

"You won't take my warnin'," Rem said to Hargish. "Yet you'll blame me if anything happens. That's one hell of a note."

"Y'darn shoutin'," Asia Lane sided in. "I can see right now, Hargish ain't goin' to make things easy for us li'l ones. King, I had a bad minute towards you, but you spoke up in my favor. I seen enough I'm convinced you're fit to ride the river with, an' that you might be needed around. You come along home with me."

"I warn you," Hargish began, and got no further. Lane's self-control snapped like a rotten cinch. His fist hit Hargish's jaw and Hargish hit the dust. He sat up, emotions of bewil-

derment, pain and rage conflicting within him.

"You see?" he cried. "More trouble already. Lane—"

"Hell with you, you stiff-necked ol' devil," Lane snarled. "Come on, King, let's get goin'."

Rem followed Lane's creaking wagon out of town. The color was draining from his face. A mile from town, Lane called, "Ride up so we can talk." He looked around, gasped, stopped and leaped from the wagon and ran back. Rem had fallen out of the saddle. He sprawled in the road, the left side of his shirt and jumper soaked with blood. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

RAVAGED RANGE

WEAKENED by loss of blood, his side inflamed and swollen where Kruss's slug had furrowed over his ribs, Rem didn't take to the saddle the next day. After getting Rem home and in Mrs. Lane's care last night, Asia had taken word to other pool members. This morning, they met at the Lane place and went to town together, to attend Younk Fraly's burial out of respect to Kay, and check with Hargish on the new order of things to be.

Lane was in a sour mood when he returned home that evening. As he unhooked his team, he told Rem, "Hargish is gettin' mighty a'ready. Called a meetin' for tomorrow at the bank. His range is 'way overstocked an', while Hargish is honest, he ain't fair. It's in him to be a range tyrant, an' to hell with us little spreads."

"He say anything about me?" Rem inquired.

"Plenty! Cussed me, too. His sore

jaw made him tempery."

Lane let the team into the lot, then said, "Kay Fraly asked about you. Wants to see you as soon as you're able to ride."

"Me? See me?" Rem blurted. "But, what about?"

"Don't know what about, Rem. Do know Kay's liable to need heavy help, though, before her affairs is all straightened out."

Early the following morning, without waiting for Lane or the others, Rem saddled up and rode to town. A darkening line on the horizon showed thunderheads banking; hot puffs of wind blew up dust clouds. Maybe the range would get the rain it so badly needed.

Rem had learned that Kay occupied a small house of her own in Sagebrush. He went straight there, dismounting outside a picket fence and walking up a path rimmed with dying flowers and shrubs. They made Rem think of the water and trees and green grass up in Damnation Valley.

He knocked on the door, wondering why his heart knocked on his throbbing side. Kay Fraly came around the side of the house.

"Why, hello, there," she greeted him, just as she had at the old Naslet place—a moment that now seemed years ago. "I didn't expect you so soon," Kay said, stepping up onto the porch. "How is your side?"

"Fine," he lied. "But would you mind if we sit down here?"

He sat down on the edge of the porch and she followed suit.

An awkward silence fell between them. Finally, Kay said, "I wish to apologize to you, Rem. For hitting you with my quirt."

"Why, forget it," he told her. "Reckon you was in a bad spot, an' all, an' had a right to be edgy. I—I was sorry for you."

"I saw that on your face, there be-

fore the bank." Kay's voice was vibrantly low. "Your expression told me a lot of things. I want to be friends, Rem."

"Friends? With me?" he mumbled. "But my father—"

"My uncle was as much guilty of my father's death as your father or his men, Rem," she interrupted. "Younk was a far worse man than your father was, in his way. I never knew, until day-before-yesterday, though, how really bad Younk Fraly was. It's a terrible thing for a brother to kill or have killed a brother!"

"Yeah," he agreed, twisting his hat in his hands. Without knowing why he did it, he began to tell her of his life, why his mother couldn't leave Damnation Valley, and about his brother, Rom. Kay was silent for a long time after he'd finished. Then she laid a warm little hand on one of his.

"I know what it is to be lonely, and feel unwanted," she said in a whispery voice. "I feel sorry for you, Rem. Even to the names given you and your brother, the pattern seems laid against you two. I remember the origin of the names. Romulus and his twin brother, Remus, were infants thrown into the River Tiber. They were rescued and nursed by a she-wolf. Romulus was founder and first king of Rome. Remus jumped the walls of the city and Romulus killed him . . . Whoever gave you those names?"

"Estelle. Phil said it showed the crazy consistency of the inconsistent. Phil was a funny jasper, an' the only real friend I ever had. I often wish I could see him again. He rode off one time, an' never come back."

"What do you intend doing now," Kay inquired.

SHE drew back, then, staring at him in amazement. Rem had risen, his

face gone suddenly bleak, his attitude grim and quiet as the steel of a six-shooter is quiet. He looked off down the road to where it widened and became the main street.

"I'm goin' an' have a talk with the three men that just come up an' left their horses in front of the Sagebrush Bar, across from the bank," Rem said in a hell-hollow voice. "Buck Honor, Big Mitch, an' my brother, Rom!"

"Wait, Rem!" Kay cried, clinging to his arm. "Get help."

"No. Maybe this can be settled without another pitched fight, with innocent folks gettin' killed an' wounded. An' you stay here."

He shook her off and strode down the path, mounted and rode down the street without once looking back at the girl. He reined up and got down two doors from the saloon, pausing to glance at Jock Hargish and three of his riders as they came in up at the feed corral. Maybe Hargish expected trouble with the pool members today?

Loosening his iron in the leather, then, Rem drew in a steady, long breath, stepped quickly down to the Sagebrush Bar and inside. Three long strides took him to the bar close to Buck Honor. Big Mitch stood next, then Rom. The trio tensed, mouths wide open as Rem faced them.

"Kind of early for you gents to be out, ain't it?" he asked.

"Wait!" Honor forestalled Rom's move as his shoulders hunched.

"Well, Mister King. An' your pleasure?" the swamper and morning bartender inquired. "I was just startin' to tell these gents about the gunfight across the street. Funny, but y'know I'd swear I'd seen the two on this end some'ere's before. An' the other'n, too—unless I saw somebody looked like him. A long time ago, seems as."

"We heard about that ol' fight," Rom snarled. "Get away."

"Not this fight, you never heard about," Rem told him. "He meant the fight a couple days ago, when Younk Fraly an' Gurt Kruss was killed."

"Wh-what!" Big Mitch blurted, and Honor gave him a keen glance in the backbar mirror.

"Yeah. I shot Kruss, an' he killed Fraly as he was dyin'. But he talked, Mitch. Kruss told a lot of things . . . Hold 'er, damn you!" Rem rested his hand on the butt of his gun. "Rom, don'cha draw."

"Let's hear this story," Honor growled. "Y'see, Mitch was powerful set on lookin' things over *alone*! I decided we'd leave the boys outta town, an' me'n Rom'd ride along with him. We sure never reckoned to find you here—an' folks callin' you Mister. Go on. . . ."

Rem moved out a step, and poured out the story.

"It's a lie!" Big Mitch snarled. "It's nothin' but a trick to mess things up. This lard-mouthed—"

"I don't think it is a trick, Mitch," Honor broke in harshly. "I always wondered about the hot lead reception, that time; an' the way your hoss went down in that creck."

"Stand aside, Buck," Rom rasped. "Gimme room to move. I aim to blow Mitch's guts out then dump this buttin'-in Rem's innards."

"Hold 'er," Honor grunted. "Somebody's openin' the bank, an' them three gun-packin' rannies loungin' around don't look good. No—"

"Hell, yes!" Rom raged, leaped out and went for his gun. The ensuing scene was a blur of motion. Rem freed his gun and jumped aside. He could have gunned Rom in that moment, but something stronger than his own necessity stayed his trigger finger. Rom's gun roared, Big Mitch pulled a trigger, and, jarred up against the bar by the shock of a bullet, Buck Honor's gun

added to the thunderous din.

Big Mitch was hammered off his feet and was dead before he hit the floor. Honor yelled at Rom, "Run for 'er," and grabbed at him. Rom screeched an oath and fired at Rem who, stepping backward, felt the slug fan his face as he tripped and fell over a chair.

"Ah, damn you. I'll teach you!" Another bullet ripped into the floor beside Rem's body. Honor shoved Rom, yelled at him again, managed to make him savvy they had to run. They belted through the doorway and hit their horses.

Hargish's riders went for their guns, but a yell from their boss in the bank's doorway stopped them. "It might be some sorta trick," Hargish yelled. "Stay where you are!"

Rom and Honor pounded up the street. As they turned the corner, they almost piled up on Lane and the other pool men. The pair raced on, ran out of sight over a rise and were gone.

REM came out of the bar as Lane and the rest ran down and got off their horses. "Big Mitch's in the saloon, plumb dead," Rem called. "That was Honor an' my brother run out. Get back on your broncs. They got a bunch out of town, an' we got to keep them a-runnin'. Rom's so crazy mad, there's no tellin' what he might do."

"No!" Kay Fraly cried, running up and planting herself in front of Rem. "Let Hargish and the others go. Don't ride after your brother—"

"He ain't goin' to. Nobody ain't," Hargish snarled, motioning to his men. "I notice he never stopped them in the bar. Well, we ain't ridin' after them decoys, leavin' the bank easy to be robbed by the rest of that bunch. King, you're stayin' right here!"

"You're a fool," Rem said quietly. "Have it your way."

"Damn right. Now, some of you men

get that outlaw outta the bar, so I can have a drink before we call the meetin' at the bank."

"Move him yourself," Lane barked. "Who the hell you think you're givin' orders to!"

"Move him, boys," Hargish snapped at his men. He presented Lane and the others a stubborn, angry expression. "Givin' orders, too? You'll mighty soon be findin' out. I—"

He stopped speaking with his mouth open, his eyes getting larger and larger. Then Hargish made a croaking sound and pointed out toward the range.

"They—they've set fire to the range!" Hargish screamed.

Stunned, the group watched a growing smoke cloud, filled with flying ashes, whip into the darkening sky. Now, the roar of the wind-driven flames in powder-dry grass, grew in their ears. At other points, fire sprang up as Rom and his followers ran, setting their fires on the way.

"No human could stop that fire," Lane croaked. "An' you're the one, Hargish, that wouldn't let us chase them, keep 'em goin'!"

The street was suddenly alive with townfolks as the sky became darker and ashes began raining down into Sageburg. The roar of the fire was loud, growing, then fading in the distance. Lane, in the group before the bank, offered up thanks.

"Thank God," he cried, "our families an' homes will be safe. There ain't enough grass back in the badlands to carry the fire across the ravines an' cut canyons."

A red-eyed, smoke-blackened cowpuncher raced down the street. "Hey, Jock," he called out to Hargish. "Bar 13 house is goin', an' everything at JH Connected is gone. A lot of beef bein' baked, but not as many as you'd figger. They're stampedin' into the bads."

"Baked or starved — what's the difference?" Lane muttered.

"You'll find out," Hargish told him. "You'll—"

"It's beginnin' to rain!" somebody yelled.

"A li'l late," Hargish grunted. "All of you, come inside. You can bring your damn outlaw along."

CHAPTER FIVE

HONOR FOR HONOR

"I AIMED to make a different sort of offer," Hargish said.

Lane glared at the man, then at his men lounging nearby.

"I see," Lane growled. "It'd been a good one, too—seein' you brought these gents with you to keep the peace you figgered your offer would sorta bust . . . Well, get to hell on with your offer."

"Miss Fraly," Hargish said, "you have somethin' comin' to you. It's up to me to say what. Here's the amount on this paper.

"Lane, the pool's got notes due. Your beef won't carry you because you won't have no range. You see, I'll need ever' bit of free range that ain't burnt; I'll need the li'l bit of grass you owe the bank on—an' then there'll be too many head on the range."

He held up one hand to forestall Lane's angry retort. "I don't want to bust you folks. I admit I don't want li'l outfits clutterin' things up. Miss Fraly, what you have comin' will be give to you in cattle, an' you'll have to move them, of course. Lane, an' you others, I'm lettin' you keep your beef if you get off your range right away. If you don't, I'll call the notes on you, an' take ever'thing!

"Don't cuss me. Seein' your outlaw

friend's brother had a hand in this, maybe your outlaw can suggest somethin'."

"There's no range in several hundred miles, an' the beef ain't ready for market!" Asia Lane spat. "An' stop blamin' Rem. After all he done—"

"Wait." Rem's quiet word stopped Lane's rising tirade.

"I know where there's range, about a hundred miles from here. Plenty of fine valley range, with water an' grass an' timber. You'd live in peace there, an' prosper, an' you could see to it no range hog rooted you out. You could build your own town."

"Sounds like a dream," lanky Rep Jones allowed.

"It's a dream I've had," Rem admitted. "But the valley ain't a dream. It's up in the Desertions, an' I got a right to go there. The Kings still owe you folks somethin'. Maybe that'll pay up."

"I understand." Lane nodded. "Damnation Valley. But the outlaws will fight—"

"There ain't many there now. More will leave after what took place down here," Rem interrupted. "The fight'll be with Rom an' Buck Honor."

"We'll tend to that if you lead us in," Lane avowed.

"No. You're married. Young Gordon's got a mother an' sister to think of. The others have dependents, too. It's up to me to claim part of my own heritage. Maybe Rom'll listen to reason."

"Y'know he won't," Rep Jones growled. "Me, I got nobody dependin' on me. I'm traipsin' along for the ride."

"Rest of us'll bunch the cattle an' start them movin'," Lane muttered. "If anything happens, I mean, if we don't go into the mountains, we got to move, along, anyhow. But before I go—"

His fist hit Hargish's jaw and Har-

gish hit the floor!

Outside, Kay caught up with Rem and drew him aside while Rep went after a pack of grub. "Rem," the girl muttered, "I don't know what to say. I can't ask you not to do this, because it is the only chance the others have. But you don't owe us this. You've done so much already. If you go there, you'll have to kill your brother, or, like the other Remus who jumped the wall, he'll kill you. If it's the first way, you'll never be the same again. You wouldn't want a wife, or children to have to tell that you killed Rom."

"I know it," he groaned.

"But no matter what happens, Rem, I'll pray while you're going to make a place for *our* herd. If you care—I'll be waiting."

She sobbed, rose on her toes and kissed him and ran.

Rem carried that kiss with him on the way into the mountains. It was in his mind the morning he and Rep Jones came through Slot Pass, unchallenged, and part of the valley's spread lay before them.

"To think of this layin' up here, with only outlaws usin' it!" Rep Jones gasped. "Rem—Hell, it's heaven!"

"We'll see if it is," Rem answered soberly. "The tracks show Honor an' Rom ain't been far ahead. Slowed down because Honor was packin' Mitch's lead, I reckon. . . . Wait."

A rider hazed a packhorse toward them. He pulled up, saying, "Howdy, Rem. Some of us figgered you'd be along. Most of the boys have hauled 'er; the few down there won't side Rom, after he went frothin' mad an' set fire to that range. Such things ain't no good, an' most've us have been cowhands, one time or another, y'see."

"Honor's pretty bad shot, an' since they rode in last night, late, Rom's been drinkin', plannin' against you, runnin' ever'body outta Owlhoot

House. You try takin' this valley, it'll mean fights to come, Rem. But not today, not today."

THEY rode on, then. Dismounting in the timber, Rem told Rep, "You stay outside. If I'm downed, ride an' tell Lane an' the others what to expect of this place. An' tell Kay I loved her, Rep."

"You're the boss, an' I hope you can tell her yourself," Rep mumbled.

"I never will. If I ain't downed, I'll have the Cain brand. That's one iron that can't be blotted, Rep."

Rem drew in a great breath of the crisp, piney air and went toward Owlhoot House. When he rounded a corner, Rep Jones drew a gun and moved to a window where he could look in.

As he paused at the door, his hand on the latch, Rem could hear Rom's voice inside. "Honor, you ain't goin' to croak," he snarled. "You'll live to see me kill that cowardly Rem, an' make the whole West run when they hear the name of King. Sit up, Buck."

"Rom, I got mine. I just hung an' rattled to get here to die," Buck Honor groaned. "Rom, I maybe see things clearer now. Maybe our way *ain't* the way to carry the King name on."

"Shut that up!" Rom yelled, and in that instant, Rem went in.

Honor sat with his back against the wall, his face ashen. There was a bottle on the table before him. Rom sat on the counter, a half-emptied bottle by his side.

Running the gamut of emotions at Rem's appearance, rendered Rom speechless at first. He gulped, lifted his bottle and drank, then hurled it straight at Rem. Rem ducked and the bottle crashed against the wall.

Rom slid off the counter. Shaking his head, Rem was the first to speak. "Wait, Rom," he begged. "Listen to me. I've as much right here as you.

The poor devils you burned out down below, have a right to this valley for their cattle and homes. After the years they suffered on account of the trick of a King, it's up to us—"

"*Hush, damn you!*" Rom bellowed. "Didn't they trick Satan? You damn right. One of them did, anyhow. An' you throw in with them, go against your own kind down there. You think I'd step out an' see them come in here? Into a valley Satan King found? Cuss the name of King, eh? Hell, they ain't even started havin' reason to cuss!"

Rom settled his feet apart as his mad rage ran hotter.

"I'm startin' with you—"

"Wait, Rom!" old Buck Honor cried.

Rom's gun was flashing up. Every nerve and fiber in Rem cried out for speed. Yet he was slow, held back by the damning fact that this was his brother he faced.

"*Rom!*" Buck Honor screamed, and his gun thundered and echoed in Owlhoot House. The barrel rested back on the table top, then the gun slid out of his hand.

Rom King raised both elbows, stood on his toes. His gun thumped the floor. A ragged sigh passed his lips, then, and he went down limply.

Rem didn't, couldn't realize what had happened. His eyes wide, mouth agape, he shook his head slowly and stared down at Rom. Buck Honor gave a despairing croak, pushed to his feet. He staggered the distance to Rom and dropped down beside him. He pulled Rom's head up on his lap.

"Rom, boy," Honor sobbed, tears streaming down his grayish, seamed face. "Rom, listen. You died easy. Not like sufferin' with a bullet in the belly; not like bein' caged up before they took you out to hang you up. An' it'd been like that, boy. Maybe the name of King ain't stood for what it ought. Maybe Satan'll savvy. Rom,

it all come clear to me. The best way to make the name a proud one was to let Rem pack it on like he's started.

"Rom, you can forgive me?"

"Rem, you reckon Rom'll understand," Honor begged. "He'll know why I done 'er, won't he, Rem?"

Old Buck Honor shuddered and bent slowly forward. So he died, his head on Rom's body, a smile on his lips.

THE three outlaws, standing beside the graves, weren't thinking of the dead. They were wondering how long it would take them to get out of Damnation Valley.

Rem patted the last piece of sod down on the mound above Buck Honor. He stood up. Swallowing a lump in his throat, he said, "I reckon they're both better off. An' they never died without leavin' somethin' good behind.

"This valley an' its tributaries ain't goin' to be crowded for a long time. We'll see it ain't. After we get in a road, we'll build a little town around Owlhoot House, along Ripple River. We'll have just about all we want or need, down there."

"Yeah," Rep Jones agreed. "An' what'll you call the town? Kingville? Satan? Some name like that?"

"Why, no," Rem answered. "We'll name it after a man who thought enough of another man's name an' memory, he tore his heart out for it. A man who killed the thing he loved above all else, in order that, at last, that name would rightly carry on. Honor worshipped Satan, an' Rom, Satan's crown prince, meant more to Honor than life itself.

"Honor. That's what we'll name the place. Honor!"

He moved down the slope toward Owlhoot House, to get his horse and ride down to love, then back to Honor, where it would be fine to obey the dictates of happiness. . . .

Borrowed Bullets

By

RALPH BERARD

Author of "Colt-Wise—Or Plumb Loco?" etc.

Cutting sign on a notch-hunter of the Jack Rabbit Kid's calibre any Range City son but Race Gordon would have thought first of the two thousand dollar reward offered for the bandit dead or alive!



Race's weapon had spoken again!

THE body was sprawled face down in the dust, arms outstretched. Blood stained the dead man's shirt. The stiff whiteness of the clutching hands in the early sunlight told young Race Gordon even before he dismounted that the man was dead. His horse, a nervous-looking high-bred grey mare, grazed some fifty feet from the short-cut trail to Range City.

Race hesitated a moment, standing there looking down at the still form. He finally stooped and turned the body over, then stepped back, startled, a

wild scatter of disconnected thoughts chasing through his brain.

Anyone living within a hundred miles of Range City would have recognized the Jack Rabbit Kid from the reward posters stuck up all over the country. Most anyone except Race Gordon would have thought first of the two thousand dollar reward offered for the bandit dead or alive.

But Race thought of something else: Of the Kid's reputation, of how the Jack Rabbit Kid had fought and killed. Every man within a thousand miles was afraid of the Jack Rabbit Kid.

All of his nineteen years Race had wanted to be feared and respected like that. And in the last four years he had had a specially good reason.

When Race had been only fifteen, he'd heard his father tell how Gatz Blemming and three hired killers had seized control of Range City and started to drive the small ranchers out of the valley. Even then Race had sometimes brooded over the thought of riding to Range City and shooting it out with Gatz Blemming. But he'd known, of course, how foolish and impossible it was and the best he could do was to borrow his dad's gunbelt without his permission and sneak to a draw in the hills where he practiced his draw and his aim. His dad, hearing the shots one day, had ridden out and surprised him there.

"Who're ya planning to kill?" Jake Gordon had asked sternly.

Race had drawn his skinny six feet up an extra inch and swelled out the strong frame of his sinewy thin chest and said, "When I grow up, I'll kill anyone who steals from you or Mom or Ritzy."

"You're mighty young for guns," his dad had said, "but it's a hard country. Don't reckon ya can learn your shooting any younger." Jake Gordon had swung his horse and ridden slowly away without looking back. Race had stared after him for a moment then had returned resolutely to his practicing. That same evening Jake Gordon had given the lad the guns and the belt and his blessing.

Now it had been just two years since Cal Fetters, the loyal foreman of Jake Gordon's Four Bar spread who had stuck by them through a long siege of drouth and rustling, had found the honest old rancher's bullet-ridden body far out on the north range and the full responsibility of the Four Bar had been thrust suddenly on Race's youthful

shoulders. Fetters had told Race, "I know it was Gatz Blemming's men who killed your dad. We saw the whole thing but it wouldn't be no use me claiming that. I'd likely just get killed for my trouble."

Race had understood how things were and he hadn't blamed Fetters for not talking. But as long as Jake Gordon was alive, the Range City Bank which Gatz Blemming had also got control of, had pretended leniency in regard to a past due payment of fifteen hundred dollars against the Four Bar. Hardly, however, had Race's father been buried before the bank filed foreclosure notice.

"It means we'll lose everything," Race's grief-stricken mother had said. And when he looked at her haggard face he had felt a hot dagger of passionate hate stab him deeply. He'd watched his kid sister, Ritzy, trying to comfort his mother and he'd sworn in tight-lipped silence that he'd settle with Gatz Blemming regardless of what happened to himself.

He had started this day for Range City to make what he knew would be a last futile appeal to the bank. Then he would try guns. Blemming's hired gunmen, Drag Shanto, Kale Bletsin or Jake Fundy, might kill him. But somehow it hadn't seemed to matter. He'd looked into his mother's anguish-filled eyes and seen the pleading hopelessness in his little sister's face and nothing much seemed to matter except the need to satisfy a kind of blind madness like a red burning passion that spurred him on and augmented the reckless determination of his youth and increased his deep faith in the rightness of his cause.

RACE recalled, as he looked down at the Jack Rabbit Kid, how his father had once said, "As long as the Jack Rabbit Kid lives us small ranch-

ers has got a chance. The Kid ain't really against what's right even if he is on the owlhoot. If ya notice right close ya'll see his depredations is against them what got their positions by robbing and killing. They say the Kid's dad owned a ranch that was lost almighty mysterious-like when his old man died."

"Just like me," Race Gordon thought now as he looked at the corpse. Then he let his bridle strap drop and he kneeled by the Kid's body. It was still warm. The Kid hadn't been dead very long. Race straightened the legs and the arms so that when the body was cold it could still be put on a horse. A sort of wild scheme was finding shape in his mind. He gave up the useless idea of talking with Blemming's banker again.

Race unbuckled the Kid's guns, a pair of perfectly matched pearl-handled weapons. He unbuckled his own, then took off his trousers and shirt. It was a dank unpleasant business, this stripping the outer clothes from a corpse and putting them on. He folded his own things neatly and laid them on the ground. Then he tucked them under the Kid's head so they wouldn't blow away and so they'd be there when he came back. He grinned at himself mockingly: "*When he came back.*" What he meant was, "*If he came back.*"

He straightened and practiced a couple of times drawing those guns of the Kid's. They balanced in his long fingers and leveled out fine. Race grinned, a hard chiseled grin like men sometimes wear when they die. He clamped his teeth tightly together and walked with slow, determined steps to where the Kid's grey horse was grazing.

The mare raised her head and moved her ears forward. Race spoke to her softly and it seemed odd how calm and even his own voice sounded. It was

like he'd always been a killer; as if he knew the horse would stand still and welcome his weight in the Kid's empty saddle.

He mounted then and rode toward Range City leaving his own horse grazing nearby. He fashioned a mask for his eyes from a black cloth he found in the Kid's pocket. The Kid was a tall skinny fellow like himself . . . and men were afraid of the Kid.

It was noon when Race Gordon rode into Range City with the black mask over his eyes. He sat straight in the saddle and kept his face forward. The horse kicked up grey dust that lay in the street and it drifted heavy in the hot air like a thick ominous cloud forecasting a storm.

The few townspeople who were about ducked out of sight because they thought Race Gordon was the Jack Rabbit Kid. Race rode to the Wildcat saloon and dismounted. It seemed to him as if there wasn't much air in the town and he moved along easily as if walking in a subconscious dream. The batwing doors seemed so light he strode through hardly knowing he'd pushed them.

Inside, it was dark and suddenly cool. It occurred to him then that maybe he'd seen the last of the sunshine but he still kept a grin on his face down under the mask and he looked a lot like the Jack Rabbit Kid.

There was the long bar on the right with Blemming's spying white-sleeved barkeep behind it. Empty chairs and tables cluttered the place. Perhaps a dozen men were sitting about. Bletsin and Fundy sat at a far corner table. He didn't see Blemming or Shanto any place about.

Race knew that every eye was on him and he vaguely wondered why. He'd even forgotten the mask on his face and didn't realize now that men who peeked in from the crack of the

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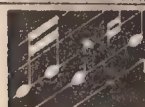
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door were watching to see what the Jack Rabbit Kid was going to do. There was no more sound in the place than in a graveyard at night.

Race kept looking for Gatz Blemming. But the man he'd come to kill for dry-gulching his father was not there. Race moved forward with measured steps and stopped by the bar, then turned his back, hooking his elbows on the hardwood, unmindful of the pale-faced, taut-lipped barkeeper behind him.

But he heard the faint click of metal and knew it was the hammer of a gun being cocked.

Instinctively he whirled on his toes. A shot sounded and lead whistled close. Only his sudden movement had saved him from the barkeeper's lead when he had tried to shoot Race in the back so he could claim the reward for the Jack Rabbit Kid.

ONE of the ivory-handled guns came into Race's hand as Fundy jumped up from his chair with a weapon raised. Fundy's gun blazed as Race leaped and rolled over the counter. He pumped lead into the barkeeper's stomach as he dropped to the floor. He had drawn his second gun in the same movement. He fired. Fundy stared, gulped and pitched forward.

Bledsin's gun kept flashing. Lead thudded into the counter. The barkeeper rolled over and was still. Race saw blood on the front of the shirt he was wearing. But the blood was dry. It was the blood of the Jack Rabbit Kid. Race had sprung from the floor and rolled over the counter in the same Jack Rabbit movement that had made the Kid famous. The set grin was still on his face and he hadn't been hit.

He hunkered along behind the counter now. The shooting stopped. Bledsin couldn't see him. Then Race stood erect, got Bledsin squarely lined in his

sights and fired. He fired again. Bledsin clutched at his waist. His gun spun in the air as he fell.

New bullets hailed across the bar now. Glass from the mirror and from broken bottles showered down. Men crouched behind overturned tables. All who weren't cowards were trying to kill the Jack Rabbit Kid and claim the reward.

Race hunkered along toward the rear. He reached a rear window and felt a bullet burn through the flesh of his hip as he toppled through in a shower of glass. He came to his feet in the alley and found himself laughing crazily, laughing and running. He'd done for two of the men that he wanted; he'd have to come back for the others.

A shower of late lead whistled around the corner of the building as Race got safely around it. He holstered his guns, ran along the far side and stopped at the corner. He stood there a split sec-

ond to straighten his mask.

A dozen men came running, yelling wildly, after the reward for the Jack Rabbit Kid. Perhaps they thought they had winged him.

Race held the Kid's guns firmly, one in each hand. He stepped around the corner and faced them with the guns leveled deadly. Taken by surprise, the men stopped as if they'd run into a wall.

"The first man t' level a weapon dies," said Race Gordon. He appraised them a moment with calm deliberation and knew they were afraid. Sheriff Ballard wasn't among them and Race was glad of that because he didn't want to mix with the law or kill any innocent person. He held them off with one pointed gun while he got to the Kid's grey mare and climbed up into the saddle. Bullets followed as he rode out of town but he was low and skinny in the Kid's saddle and none of them reached him.

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(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

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You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is

poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a postcard to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 977J, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.



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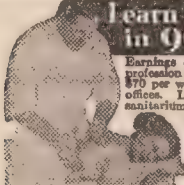
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DON'T DELAY—DO IT NOW!

In the first ravine that would hide himself and the horse he drew up. His wound was only a scratch and had almost stopped bleeding. But it made him feel stiff and it pained. Still he was grinning and what he had done didn't seem anything great.

Race waited there in the ravine. He kept thinking of his mother and of his kid sister and of how his job was only half finished. He wasn't much afraid of a posse because it seemed the sheriff had been out of town. If anyone did follow him they'd never expect him to stop this close to town.

Just after dusk he spurred the horse out of the ravine and rode back to Range City. It was pitch dark when he tied the grey mare behind an abandoned building on the outskirts of town. He ran eagerly to the rear of the Wildcat and found, as he'd expected, that the window he had leaped through had not been repaired.

Peering through the broken glass he saw that the place had been cleaned up. There was a larger crowd inside than there had been at noon. A new barkeeper was serving the drinks.

Race could only see behind the counter and a little past the end of it. Outside the building, he was in shadow and there was little chance of them seeing him. Suddenly he realized some men were sitting at a table to his right. He couldn't see them but he could hear their words.

"You weren't here during the fight at noon, still ya got a bullet wound," an authoritative voice accused. "How'd it happen?"

"I tell yuh, Boss, I shot it out with the Jack Rabbit Kid just before daylight."

RACE strained closer, held his ear to a glass next to the one which was broken.

"You've always boasted, Shanto,

about getting the Jack Rabbit Kid. Suppose you killed him this time?" A low satirical laugh followed the words. Then Race's teeth snapped together and his right hand clutched a gun handle. He recognized Gatz Blemming's voice.

"Don't guess I killed him," Shanto was saying. "But he swayed a lot in the saddle and he didn't follow . . . he spurred out o' range mighty pronto."

Blemming's mocking laugh rose louder. "Ya slipped, Shanto. Ya almost admitted he didn't follow when ya ran away."

The Jack Rabbit Kid's guns came into Race's hands again, their ivory handles feeling warm and friendly in his grasp. Their long barrels crashed the remaining glass of the window. He stepped inside and faced the men at the table.

Shanto's coal black eyes flashed mixed hatred and fear. He saw the black mask. He recognized the Jack Rabbit Kid's guns.

The roomful of men stood watching. Tense. Eager. But hesitant. Gatz Blemming was watching, his hand near his gun, but making no effort to raise it.

Race let a quick glance sweep the room. He saw the crowd standing silent, motionless, like tintype pictures of men. Sheriff Ballard stepped suddenly out from the others and began to move forward.

Race swung around to face the lawman. He let the muzzles of his guns drop down, dropped the weapons themselves back to their holsters. He felt the cold crease of his grin come back on his face as a plan came to his mind and he watched with the tail of his eye to see Shanto slowly snaking out his gun. He felt rather than saw Gatz Blemming shift in his chair. The sheriff was still a dozen paces away and Blemming didn't want the Jack Rabbit Kid to be taken alive.



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Shanto's gun came up almost level. Blemming's weapons were ready in his hands. And when Shanto would have fired Race jerked himself back as a jack rabbit crouches before it leaps forward. As Shanto fired he threw himself downward and forward and came to his knees answering the fire both Shanto and Blemming had started. Race's weapons spoke again and again. They spat out the hate and lust for vengeance that sprang from inside him. While his leads drove deep into Shanto and deep in Blemming he felt their leads seeking his own flesh. He stumbled, fell, and rolled back through the broken window.

He got somehow to those few quiet blocks at the edge of town where he'd tied the Kid's horse in the blackness. Shouting and the sound of horse's hoofs came from in front of the Wildcat. Race didn't spur the horse into flight. He held it in check and let it pick slow steps between the dark buildings that cast no shadows in the absolute blackness. The little sound his horse made was lost in the greater noise of the sheriff's hastily organized posse. Race was a mile away before the posse was ready, and then they didn't know which way to follow because of the darkness.

BUT the first streaks of dawn found the posse close on his trail. In daylight it wasn't a hard trail to follow. The tracks of his horse led along the short cut to the Four Bar Ranch. Streaks of blood marked the way.

They were less than half way when Sheriff Ballard halted his party. Two horsemen were riding toward them. As they came nearer they saw that one man was slumped and stiff. He was dead, his body tied to the saddle of the grey horse. A thin, tall youth on a cowpony came leading the grey. The youth looked familiar to Ballard and a moment later he recognized Race.



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Race said weakly, "Had quite a fight, Sheriff, but I killed the Jack Rabbit Kid. I'm claimin' the reward."

Ballard's eyes narrowed. "Yeah," he said doubtfully. He rode up to Race and yanked his guns from his holsters. Then he drew alongside the dead man's mount, drew the ivory handled guns from the Kid's belt and frowned. Then he fingered curiously the red ribbons of the Jack Rabbit Kid's torn left shirt sleeve and raised clear, honest eyes to meet Race's. "You were wearin' the Kid's clothes when you got yer hand busted up," he accused.

But Race's eyes had fluttered shut. He reeled in the saddle and a deputy whose horse stood nearest barely kept him from falling.

He got back his senses on the way into town. He was riding in front of somebody's saddle and that was about all he could tell. The jerking of the horse jarred his head and he couldn't get coherence into his thinking. Pretty soon he passed out again.

Then he was sitting in old Doc Reynold's office and someone was sponging his face. Sheriff Ballard sat beside him. He felt pain in his hand, in his arm, down in his leg and in his hip.

"You're not going to die," the doctor said.

Race tried to grin. He thought vaguely about Billy the Kid and the luck that went with fighting for a good cause. "Didn't figure I would," he said, then turned toward the sheriff. "Did you send word to my folks?"

"I sent a deputy," Ballard said. "They ought to get here after a little."

Race raised on his elbow. He was weak but he felt a little excited. "I killed the Jack Rabbit Kid, Sheriff. I shot him in the right side under the arm. You'll find a hole in his shirt where there isn't one in my body. I took his clothes and rode into town and I killed four men that every honest man in town

wanted killed. And I never killed one of them till he shot at me first."

The sheriff's face was stern. "You impersonated an outlaw which gave 'em a right to shoot you on sight."

"They had their rights," Race grinned. "Only they're dead and I ain't. I'm still claiming the reward. I've got to have fifteen hundred dollars down to the bank by tonight to save the Four Bar for mother and Ritzy."

Doc Reynolds put a kind hand on the lad's shoulder. "Son," he said, "Sheriff Ballard asked me to examine the Jack Rabbit Kid and say how long he's been dead. I haven't told him yet but I just came across the street and I saw people standing in little groups and I heard them talking. They're saying, lad, that the outlaw was the best friend this town ever had. They're planning to give him a mighty fine funeral. They think the shooting you did was done by the Jack Rabbit Kid. It's better I think that they shouldn't know any different. You could have killed the Kid after he did his shooting here. That way you'd be entitled to the reward and folks couldn't stay mad at you long for killing an outlaw with a price on his head." The old sawbones sighed deeply and turned to Ballard.

"Sheriff," he said, "no doctor can tell exactly how long a man's been dead. If Race Gordon here says he killed the kid, I don't see how you can prove that he didn't. The Kid was killed with a .45 bullet and that's the caliber of Race's guns."

Ballard smiled slightly and nodded his understanding. "Guess maybe you're right, Doc. Race ought t' have the reward."

Race lay back then with a little sigh of relief. He had a feeling as if the Jack Rabbit Kid were there in the room saying, "It sounds all right to me, Partner. It's the way I'd want it to be."

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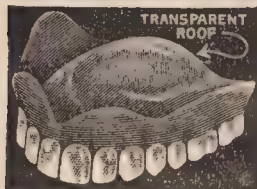
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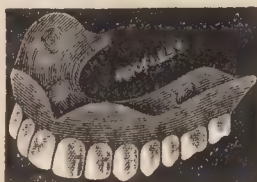
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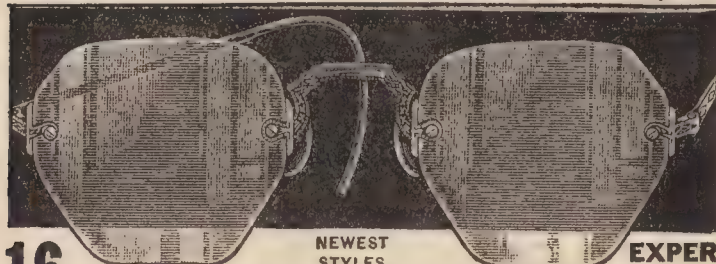
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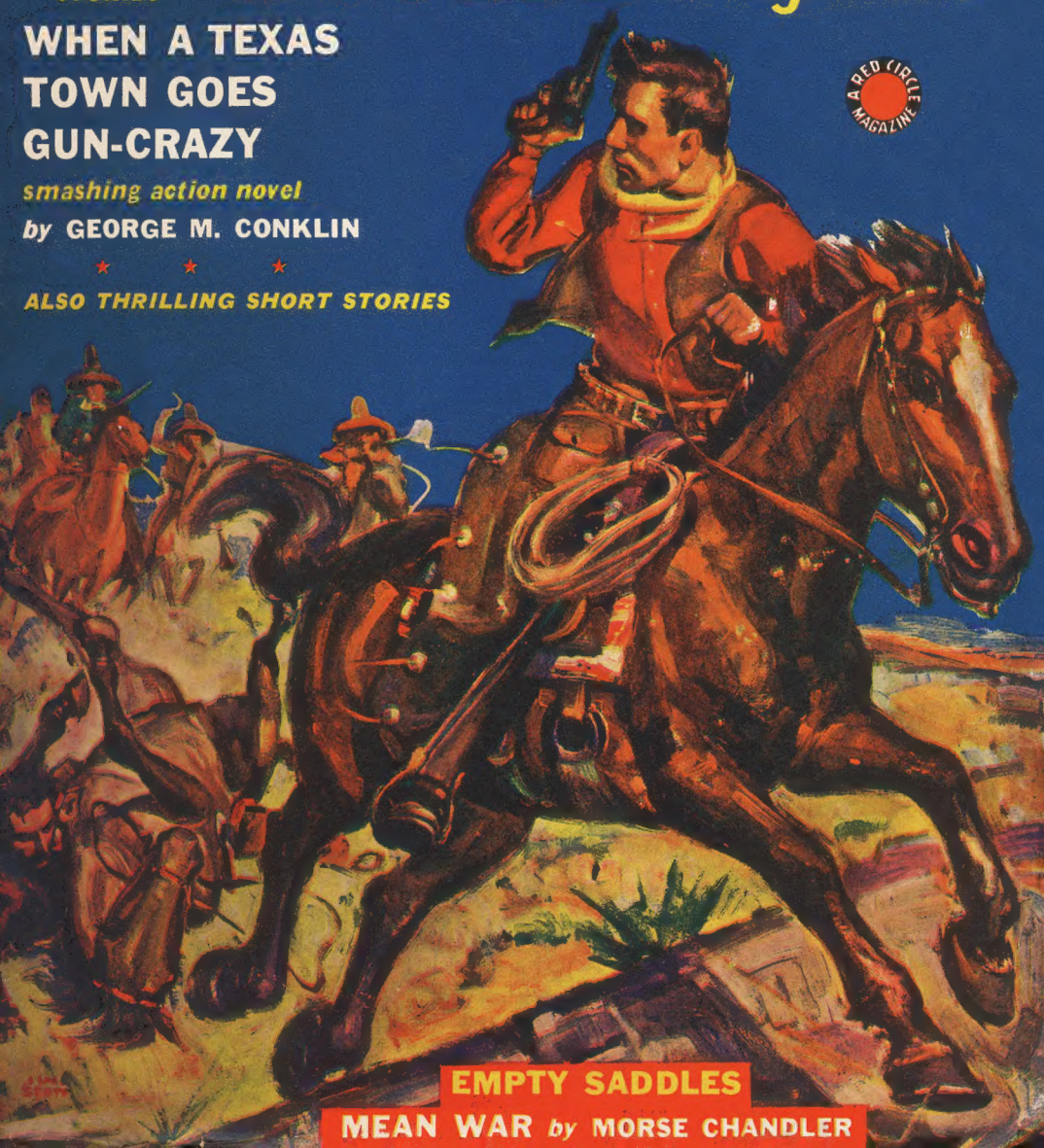
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